

SLAYERS

1 THE SLAYERS



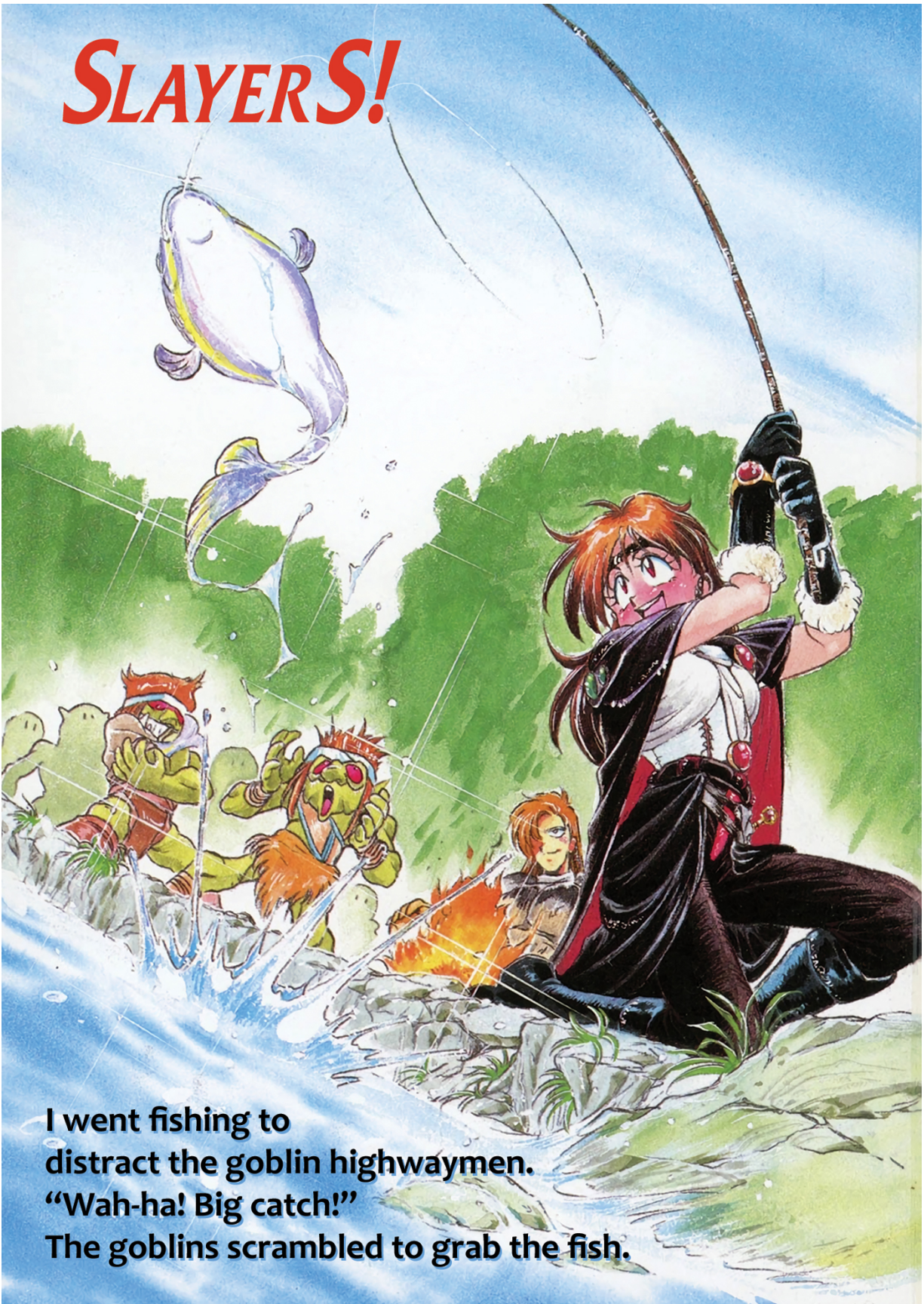
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SLAYERS!



**I went fishing to
distract the goblin highwaymen.
“Wah-ha! Big catch!”
The goblins scrambled to grab the fish.**



Zelgadis entered the forest after me.
That much I expected... Before I knew what was happening,
he'd driven a knee
into my solar plexus.



A chunk of flesh
sloughed from his cheek.
I finally realized what
he really was...





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1: Beware! Bandit Bullying and a Place for the Night

I was being followed.

So what, you ask? Aw, don't be like that. I know it's a pretty common story. Actually, it's practically an everyday occurrence for me...

Look, I'm just trying to spin a narrative here. Proper setup and suspense and all that. So bear with me, okay?

Anyway, I reckoned my pursuers had to be closing in about now. They were bandits, by the way. As for *why* they were coming after me... Well, let's just say I haven't gotten a lot of honest work lately, and my purse was feeling so neglected that I was forced to raid a bandit hideout and avail myself of some treasure.

Yeah, I know. It doesn't sound good. I didn't take much, though! Seriously! In the grand scheme of things, it was like the most minuscule speck of dirt under a pixie's fingernail! Yet for *some* reason, these jerks just couldn't let it go. That's why they've been following me and following me and *following me* ever since! How stingy can you be?

Well, I guess if you're the giving type, you generally don't choose "bandit" as your top career choice...

Anyway, this wasn't quite "bandits flitting in and out of my peripheral vision" levels of urgent yet. It's just... my dainty little legs can only carry me so fast, you know? I can't outrun a bunch of big, stinky men. I know they're gonna catch up to me sooner or later... Oh, what will become of our fair heroine Lina?!

Who's Lina, you ask? Seriously?! Me! *I'm* Lina!

Ahem. Anyway...

I pulled the curtain on my rambling inner monologue as I stopped in place. Dense, unyielding trees crowded both sides of the deserted path, which otherwise cut straight through the forest ahead. The bright noon sun was streaming down through the thick canopy overhead. It was pretty much the same scenery I'd been looking at for a while now. Except...

It was quiet. Too quiet. The birds had all stopped singing and the other animals had fallen silent. And I could tell why. There was a clear air of hostility emanating from the underbrush.

I'm surrounded.

The bandits must've used their knowledge of the area to head me off. I thought about calling out to them, but nothing particularly snappy came to mind. So instead, I just stood still and waited. It was an equally effective way of saying, "Hey, I know you're out there."

I mentioned earlier that I was on a straight path through the forest, but this particular stretch of it was pretty wide—plenty of space for a proper brawl! See, if I'd chosen a narrower place to stop, I'd practically be asking to be backstabbed from the bushes.

Anyhoo, I didn't have to wait long before a man stepped out of the woods and onto the road ahead of me. He was clearly trying to block my way.

"Fancy running into you here, little girl," he said, falling back on the kind of hoary old cliché that not even zombies and skeletons would be caught dead using nowadays.

Smooth-shaved head? Check. No shirt? Check. Eyepatch? Check. His whole look just screamed "I'm a bandit chief!" in an I'm-trying-too-hard kind of way. Oh, and did I mention the scimitar in his hand? Basically doubling down on the whole aesthetic. Yeah, this was definitely the kind of guy who shows up in the first half of the story only to get smacked down hard by a plucky band of heroes.

My favorite part was his skin, which was so greasy it

looked like he'd rubbed himself down with lard (hnnngh).

"You've given us the slip so far..."

Oh, for the love of...!

I mean, okay, I'd already figured this guy's vocabulary was maybe a hundred words at best, but still! At least *try* to come up with a line that hasn't been used a million zillion times before!

"...But now it's time we pay you back for the trouble."

You're killing me, old man!

"At least, that's what I was gonna say..." he muttered, the grin on his face turning creepy.

Uh-oh. What now?

"I'm gonna be honest here: I don't wanna fight you. For one thing, I expect you to give as good as you get. You've got balls, you know? Er, I mean that as a compliment. Anyway, what you did back at our base was a work of art. Scattering us all with one big spell out of nowhere, setting fire to everything in your path... Our boss died in that fire, y'know? And while we were all running around like chickens with our heads cut off, you went and swiped the best loot outta the storehouse. Not even we'd do something that cold, little lady."

Okay, yeah... That may or may not have been how things actually went down. But so what? *No rights for the wicked*—that's my motto!

"I think you've got what it takes, so I'm gonna make you an offer. See, I came out here to avenge my late boss. That means this goes one of two ways: either we chase you down until we kill you, or until you kill all of us. We can agree that's a bad deal for both parties, right? So... how's about you *join* us instead?"

I was offended at the mere suggestion. It was absolutely preposterous. I'm a law-abiding citizen, after all!

...No, really! I am!

"Give back our treasure and agree to join our gang, and we'll let bygones be bygones about the boss. The work ain't

that hard, if that's what you're wondering. Just do what I say and everyone's happy. I'll even treat you nice. We'll have a few laughs together. Well? Not a bad deal, huh?" he offered, that gross grin creeping across his lips again.

Hoo boy... Well, that at least explained a few things.

It was starting to sound like this guy was the group's second-in-command, who'd had his eye on the boss's digs for years. So when I came along and offered the guy, I was basically handing him exactly what he wanted.

That meant he hadn't come after me for revenge so much as he had come to get his treasure back. And once he found me, he'd decided he wanted me—my power and my body.

Too bad I'm not the kind of jerk who teams up with bandits. Also, I don't know why he thought I'd be even the tiniest bit tempted by the offer of palling it up with a quintessentially middle-aged bandit. What girl wants to spend the rest of her days asking, "How did robbing innocent villagers go today, dear?"

Besides, I'm saving myself for Prince Charming! Okay, not really, but you get the idea!

"Better answer fast, girlie. We can't be hanging around here all day. Gotta find a new hideout on the double."

Wow, this guy just wouldn't shut up. I guess he was feeling pressured by my lack of a response. My voice is pleasantly chirpy and girlish, you see, so I'm sure a few words from me would've helped put him at ease... but why should I do this guy any favors? I just stood there in silence while he kept talking and talking and talking. It was clear that he was growing more agitated by the minute.

"So, what do you think? Say something already!" he barked.

"No," I said, countering his long ramble with a single word. I said it brusquely too, in as deep a voice as I could manage without it sounding unnatural.

"What the..." he muttered, his mouth agape and the color visibly draining from his face.

“You...!” he finally managed to squeeze out. “You stupid bitch! I come to you, hat in hand, and this is how you treat me?! Well, I know how to deal with trash like you! I’ll slice you to ribbons! C’mon out, boys!”

Answering his call, the other bandits hidden in the forest came pouring out to surround me. There were about a dozen of them in total.

“Not a lot of you, are there?” I said, and I meant it.

But, man, you shoulda seen the guy’s face! It was hilarious. I guess he just couldn’t believe I wasn’t impressed by the size of his gang.

“F-Feh! There are more of us, just so you know! Yeah! A lot more! I’ve got men in the forest with their bows trained on you as we speak! One word from me, and they’ll shred you like an old rag. But if you get down on your knees and beg my forgiveness, I *might* just spare you. So come on, go ahead!”

Talk about an obvious bluff! Learning to sense people hiding in a forest is Sword & Sorcery 101. So I’d have known in a heartbeat if anyone was really there, seeing as how I’m both an ace swordsman *and* a virtuoso sorcerer...

Oh Lina, you modest thing!

Anyhoo, just about when I’d decided to finish what I’d started with these guys...

“Hold it right there!” a voice called out.

We all turned to see who it was and saw a man—a real “traveling mercenary” type—standing there with the noon sun glittering off his unsheathed longsword. I was kind of waiting for a theme song to start playing, maybe one with a woodwind section.

He was tall and slender, and wore a gleaming black breastplate that looked like it was made from iron serpent scales. He looked to me like your archetypal “light fighter.” The kind of guy who capitalizes on speed and technique over brute force. His hair was platinum blond, and I gotta admit, he was pretty easy on the eyes.



“Turn tail and run home, you petty thieves... unless you care to taste my blade,” he said brazenly.

The frustrated bandit leader’s face went from pale to purple.

“Butt out! This ain’t none of your business! Just who are you, anyway?”

“I have no name for scum like you!”

Omigosh, now *that* was embarrassing. But it’s what he honestly said, so I have to relay it. Guh, I feel like I just swallowed a bug...

Anyway, you see this kind of thing all the time. Whenever someone’s in trouble, guys like this just come out of the woodwork! Funny that they’re usually good-looking and pretty decent fighters to boot.

“You brat! I’ll take care of you first, then! Get ‘im, boys!”

“Right!”

And just like you’d expect, a big ol’ swashbuckling action scene broke out. I considered helping Mr. Hero out, but then I thought, you know what? I’ll let him have his moment. I decided to go all-in on the damsel-in-distress role instead, running around aimlessly and screaming my head off.

Boy, was that the life! I got so into screaming and flailing that the fight was over before I knew it. Needless to say, Mr. Hero came out on top.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he turned his eyes to me... and was stunned into silence.

This was fairly normal. I mean, not to brag or anything, but I’m a pretty hot little number. I’ve got those big, round eyes. That cute little face. The kind of trim, slender, petite silhouette that just fans a man’s protective instincts.

He let out a grand sigh. (One of admiration, no doubt.) But then he whispered something I heard clear as day...

“Oh... it’s just a kid.”

Ack! Okay, *that* really hurt. But he didn’t stop there.

“With all the fuss over her, I figured she’d at least be attractive... I stuck my neck out hoping I’d make a good

impression... but it's just some doe-eyed, flat-chested little kid."

Oof!

Okay, so maybe I'm a little short for my age. Okay, maybe my chest is a little on the... modest side. And *fine*, maybe I look a little young for my years. But you don't have to twist the knife, dammit! I mean, sure, he probably thought I couldn't hear him mumbling to himself, but unfortunately for everyone, I've got pretty keen ears. I've been told they're as sharp as an elf's, in fact.

Nevertheless, it *was* true that he'd stuck his neck out to save me (even if I'd let him do it), so I figured I should at least thank him.

"Th-Thanks a lot. Really," I mustered with a forced grin.

"I only did what any man would have," he said with a faint laugh. "I hope you weren't harmed, little miss."

Little miss, huh?

"But you know, it's not safe for a young lady like yourself to be out here alone. Do you have an escort? Is your father with you?"

Grrr...

"As it just so happens, I'm traveling alone."

Arrrgh...

He probably couldn't see it with my bangs covering my forehead, but I was sure the veins were popping out of my temples.

"That won't do... But worry not. Your new big brother will see you home safely."

Why, you...! You...! You...!

"So, where do you live, little miss?"

Ooooooh...

"Er, well... I don't have any particular destination in mind. I was thinking of heading for Atlas City, though..."

"Oh. Oh, yes, of course. What a brave little thing you are."

"...Excuse me?"

"There's no need to worry. Life can be complicated. I

understand.”

“Um...”

“No, don’t speak. I understand completely.”

Uh... huh.

I’d been staring at the ground this whole time, speaking in the most restrained manner I could muster in an attempt to hold back my seething irritation. But Mr. Hero here misinterpreted my polite reticence as caginess. He seemed to think I was some poor little girl who’d been forced to leave home under less-than-fortunate circumstances.

I patiently attempted to correct him on that point.

“Er, no, really... You see, I’m just kind of traveling the world, seeing the sights...”

“Please, no need for excuses,” he said as though admonishing a child. “I won’t press you any further.”

Okay, yeah, this is hopeless.

“Oh, I know! I shall escort you to Atlas City myself.”

Hey, hang on a minute!

“N-No, you don’t have to do that...”

Give me a break! Atlas City was about ten days from here. Two hundred and forty hours with this irritating jerk? I was gonna get a stomach ulcer! No, my stomach was just plain gonna melt!

“Don’t be like that, little miss. I can tell you need a friend right now.”

That’s not your call, man!

“Er, no... You *really* don’t have to do that...”

That back-and-forth went on and on, until at last...

A few hours later, we were strolling down the main road side by side. Yeah, okay, so I gave in. My head was still pounding from the whole encounter.

“Oh, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself, have I? I’m Gourry, a traveling mercenary. Though I guess that part was obvious enough. Now, what about yourself, little miss?”

I was irritated enough that I briefly considered giving him a fake name. But my better judgment told me there was no

point in bothering.

"I'm Lina. Just your typical traveler."

I was honest about my name, though it should've been blatantly obvious from one look at me that I was anything but your typical traveler. Gourry, however, showed no inclination to call me on it. I guess he figured I had some reason for lying.

You see why I caved in the end? He was clearly a decent dude. A bona fide good guy. If he'd given the slightest inkling of creepy "Oh, yes, let's travel together, little girl... heh heh heh" shenanigans, I would've knocked him flat on his ass without a second thought. But Gourry seemed genuinely concerned about me, which was why I couldn't just turn him away...

But even so...

"But even so..." he mumbled to himself, apparently still under the impression that I couldn't hear him when he did this. "Babysitting some kid on her way to Atlas City? Not exactly the most glamorous job in the world..."

But even so, he *really* got on my nerves.

Once I got a moment to myself, I let out the big, deep sigh I'd been holding in all day.

We'd stopped for the night in a lodging town along the main road. After dinner, we went to our rooms. Gourry took his next to mine.

My own room was pretty small, with the floor and walls all made of wood. The furnishings consisted of a bed and a table that held a single lamp, which was the only source of light in the room. Not exactly the lap of luxury, but at least the place looked well maintained.

My nose got a heavy dose of the distinctive scent of burning animal oil as I entered the room and bolted the door. I quickly unfastened my cape, which I shrugged off unceremoniously. Whew, that was one burden off my shoulders!

With my cape on the floor, I immediately started rooting through it. It was still jam-packed with the spoils of war from my victory over the bandits—in other words, all the loot I'd swiped. That whole escapade had turned into such a mess that I hadn't had a chance to sort through it all since I'd first dumped it into sacks. I'd tried to be discerning about what I took—passing over anything too small-potatoes or too cumbersome—but I'd still made off with quite a haul.

I plopped down on my outspread cape and started pulling things out of my various leather bags. Then I held my hands up, palms facing each other, in front of my chest. I began chanting a spell under my breath, and as I slowly pulled my hands apart, a ball of light appeared between them.

I tossed the ball of light up toward the ceiling, and the room was suddenly filled with a radiant glow. This was a little spell I knew called "Lighting." I needed more than just the oil lamp in the room if I wanted to get a good look at all my new treasure. Let's see...

Two or three hundred considerably-sized gemstones. Some of them were scratched, but I could sort that out later.

One orichalcum idol... Ooh, that should fetch a good price.

Then there was a pretty big knife. It was technically a magic weapon, but the enchantment on it looked pretty nasty.

"Probably sends you on a killing spree if you use it too much... Well, it still might fetch a decent price at a magic shop somewhere. Next up..."

A dozen or so coins from the Principality of Letidius, which had fallen five hundred years ago. Woohoo! That one got a whistle out of me.

"Lucky me! I can sell these to any collector, no sweat."

That about wrapped it up for my haul. Not the most valuable stuff in the world, but about par for a random group of petty bandits.

Of course, "valuable" is relative, mind you. Even if I

lowballed myself selling all of this, I'd still walk away with enough money to provide a normal person a comfortable retirement.

What? No, I'm not greedy. Magic's just an expensive business, okay?

"Now, for these puppies..."

It was time to get to work on the gemstones.

I first organized them by type, and then sorted each type into two piles: scratched and flawless. I could sell the pristine ones as-is, but the B-grade ones wouldn't fetch much in their current condition. They needed a little TLC. Don't worry. I had a plan.

I pulled a few more things out of my bags. The first was a crystal ball type deal about the size of a child's fist, which I gingerly set on the floor. It rolled around a little before slowing to a stop with the marker inside of it pointing toward the window.

"Gotcha. That way's north, so..."

Next, I unrolled a piece of paper with a magic circle drawn in the center of it out over the floor. The paper was perfectly square, just wide enough that I could roll it out without straining, and had the color and luster of an elf maiden's skin.

(If it sounds like I'm being vague about my tools, materials, and incantations, you're right. The details have been redacted. They're all trade secrets. Sorry.)

After that, I painted a small piece of wood with special ink and used it to stamp a smaller magic circle onto a smaller piece of paper. I then set a pristine ruby in the center of the magic circle on the floor and placed the little paper I'd just stamped upon that. And to top it all off, I quietly chanted a fire spell. The little paper burst into flames, incinerated to ash in a flash.

"Okay, that's step one," I sighed as I peered at my handiwork.

The small magic circle was now visible inside the ruby

sitting on the floor; the spell I'd just cast had sealed it in there.

Next, I took one of the scratched rubies in my left hand and held it over the gem containing the magic circle. I then recited a wind spell, which crumbled the gem in my hand like old clay. The newly-created ruby dust rained down onto the gem below it.

I repeated the same process over and over until I'd disposed of all the scratched rubies the same way, leaving a massive pile of ruby dust lying in the magic circle on the floor.

"Now then..."

I sprinkled some clear fluid from a small bottle over the pile and held my left palm out over it, chanting a particular pattern of earth and water spells. My outstretched palm began to glow, and the mountain of ruby powder let out a flash of light.

By the time I slowly pulled my hand away, what had once been a mountain was now a mere lump.

Success. Now I just had to wait.

The ruby's surface, rough like unglazed pottery, slowly became more lustrous, almost like it was melting... until at last, it solidified into a large ruby about the size of an adult's fist, the magic circle still sealed inside.



“Okay, one down!”

After that, I repeated the entire process with the other varieties of gemstones I’d gotten my hands on.

Upgrading them into magical artifacts ensured they’d sell for good coin. They made simple protective talismans when mounted in pendants, and they could similarly enhance the capabilities of weapons and armor. The pendant, bandanna, and shortsword I wore were all rightly equipped with them.

Fashionable, flashy, *and* practical, they’re all the rage with the bourgeoisie! Buy yourself a jeweled amulet today!

Whoops! Accidentally slipped into marketing mode there! That’s what I get for growing up in a merchant family...

Hang in there, Lina! Nine days left to Atlas City!

The following day, Gourry and I set off down the main road again. The weather was perfect. There must have been a river somewhere nearby too, because I could hear the faint babbling of water. The leaves rustled in the trees, shyly answering the gentle whisper of the wind. Sunlight pouring through the branches dappled the parched road below. It was an idyllic afternoon.

I let out a little sigh...

“I’m hungry.”

Hey, keep your judgment to yourself! A girl can’t help when she gets hungry! We’d left first thing in the morning, and the next town was a full day away! It was around noon that we’d spotted a caravan on the side of the road enjoying some trail rations... which clued us in to the fact that there wouldn’t be any waystations or restaurants along the way.

“You promised not to say that, little miss...” Gourry said, sounding worn.

He didn’t even bother to turn my way when he said it. I was more annoyed that he was still calling me “little miss,” though...

“Sometimes a man just has to tough it out,” he continued.

“I’m not a man,” I quipped back.

Gourry paused for a second there and finally looked my way.

"The same goes for women," he said. "In tough times, you have to tough it out."

"Does traveling on some aimless journey really qualify as 'tough times'?"

Gourry came to a stop, and we both stared at each other for a long time. Our silence was punctuated only by the sound of the babbling water nearby.

In the end, we decided to go fishing for lunch.

The river wasn't far off the beaten path and ran parallel to the main road. (Technically, I guess I should say that the road ran parallel to the river...) It looked wide and deep enough to swim in, the water was clear and clean, and the bank was all sandy soil. It was the perfect place to sit and take a lunch break.

"Here, fishie, fishie!" I sang as I got to work.

First, I picked out an appropriately-sized fallen tree branch. I then plucked a small fishing hook from my bag and a few lovely chestnut-colored hairs from my own darling little head. I braided the latter into one long cord, which I attached the hook to before tying the whole thing to the branch. Voila—one impromptu fishing rod!

"All done!"

"Impressive survival skills," Gourry commented, entranced as he watched.

"You hold this," I said, handing him the rod as we headed for the water.

I turned over a big ol' river rock and snagged a couple of creepy-looking bugs (I don't know what kind exactly) that were clinging to its underside. I slapped one of them on the hook and cast our line.

The river kept babbling as it flowed by.

Okay... Pull it back, recast, and... snag!

The river just kept babbling...

[Sequence abridged for your benefit.]

It wasn't long before we'd amassed a small pile of fish. Gourry started a fire, so we salted and roasted those babies on the spot.

Mm, that's tasty!

If I'm being honest, I like this straight-from-the-source stuff better than the fish you get at most restaurants. If they're small enough, I like to gobble 'em down, head and all.

"I can't believe you just bite into them like that," Gourry groaned, his mouth agape in disbelief.

For all his professions of manhood, there he was... daintily picking away at the white flesh of his fish like some little girl.

"What a waste," I lamented. "You don't have to eat the head, but at least eat the guts."

"I don't wanna eat guts..."

"Weirdo. That's the best part!" I declared, reaching for my second fish and boldly biting into its belly.

"But that's like... its digestive system, right?" he said, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"You bet it is!"

"So the bug you caught it with is somewhere in there..."

Blurgh!

I reflexively spat out what was in my mouth.

You... You traitor...

"Y-Yeah, I guess it might be..."

"No, it *is*."

"Okay, but still..."

You don't have to say that right as I'm eating it! Argh, jeez...

And so, between all the conversation and my aggrieved inner monologue, we polished off the whole lot of fish we'd caught. And yes, Gourry ate more than I did, just in case you were wondering.

"Hmm, I'm still a bit peckish..." he admitted.

“Okay, then let’s catch a few more.”

I stood up, walked away from the fire, and reached for the fishing rod I’d left sitting out...

But my hand stopped midway. I could feel a presence nearby.

“Goblins,” Gourry muttered, not sounding especially perturbed. His voice was so quiet that I just barely heard him. “I caught a glimpse of them earlier. About twenty-four in all.”

Ah, of course! I picked up my fishing pole. If this was goblin territory, that would explain the lack of restaurants and rest stops in the area.

Goblins are perhaps the most populous species around, so virtually everyone’s seen them: humanoid creatures that stand about chest high. They’re nocturnal and fairly intelligent, but they’re kind of aggressive in terms of personality... though they can be a little cowardly, too. They mostly come out at night to steal cattle from towns and villages that are far enough away from the big cities to be vulnerable.

Moreover... they’re a lot of fun to mess with.

I took the fishing hook in my left hand and quietly recited a little “bite-at-every-cast” (proper name pending) spell. This was a Lina original, mind you. If it got out, it would spell the extinction of fish everywhere. That’s why I kept it in-house, so to speak, and I didn’t use it all that often myself.

Now, just as I finished chanting the spell...

“Skreh!”

With some strange sort of war cry, the goblins poured out of the undergrowth. They were armed (after a fashion) with rusty little swords and improvised spears made from bits of iron tied to sticks. Goblin highwaymen.

“Hush! Quiet!” I immediately said in Goblin.

The goblins all stopped in their tracks.

Now’s my chance!

I used the momentary distraction I’d created (not that it

was especially hard) and cast my line into the water.

The river babbled as it flowed by... But other than that, there was silence.

The goblins all seemed to be wondering what I was doing as they stood there watching me. Goblins are curious by nature, you see, so I knew they wouldn't attack until they'd figured out what I was doing.

And it wasn't long before I got a bite.

"Yes!" I cried, still in Goblin, as I yanked the rod out of the water. "Yes! Big catch!"

I then pulled back on the pole while the fish was in the air at just the right moment, unhooking it and dropping it smack in front of the goblins. Easy enough to describe, sure, but a lot harder to pull off. Be impressed, okay?

"Grab it!" I shouted in Goblin.

"Skreek!"

"Skarak, skraa!"

"Skreeskra!"

Yes, good boys...

By the time the goblins nabbed the fish flopping around on the shore, I'd hooked two more. Needless to say, they just kept biting. By the time I'd hauled ten fish to shore, the goblins had formed a ring around me.

Now I got 'em.

"Here," I said as I passed the pole over to the closest goblin.

"Skree?"

"It catches lots of fish," I said to him in his own tongue.

"Want to try?"

"Skree...?"

The goblin accepted the pole, head inquisitively cocked to the side, and cast the line into the water. He caught a fish immediately.

"Skreeskree!"

As his fellows crowded around him in excitement, Gourry and I made our exit.

"That was an interesting trick," Gourry said to me later that night.

We'd finally made it to the next lodging town, and we were currently eating dinner at the tavern on the first floor of the inn, which reeked of booze and cheap cigars.

In a flash, I tore into the chicken leg in my left hand. It wasn't too bad.

Hom, nom, nom... Mm!

In a flash, I drank down the cup of lesys juice in my right hand.

Oh, wait, *that's* what Gourry was talking about!

"You mean this afternoon?"

Splat!

Gourry promptly faceplanted on the table.

Look, I wasn't trying to play dumb or anything. I just hadn't given the whole fishing trick that much thought. No, honestly. I mean it!

"It was a super simple spell. Practically any sorcerer could pull it off."

"Ohh?" Gourry hummed, impressed. "Does that mean you're a sorcerer?"

Blarghsplat!

Now it was my turn to faceplant on the table.

"Hang on, buddy!" I laid into Gourry. "Just what did you think I was? The outfit didn't give it away?!"

Just so you know, my outfit this whole time had consisted of pants and tall boots; a loose-fitting tunic kept in place with a thick leather belt; thin leather gloves; a bandanna over my forehead; and pauldrons made from great turtle shells that had been polished thin and smooth, from which my cape hung down to just above the floor. Everything was a stylish black, accented here and there with magical glyphs embroidered in silver thread. My outfit was a bit like magical armor, a talisman of protection in its own right.

On top of that, I had my accessories—silver bracelets and

a necklace, as well as a shortsword affixed with one of my own handcrafted magic jewels—which sparkled with a dazzling light. If anyone could look at all that and assume I was a waitress or a fishmonger or something, they had to be braindead, plain and simple.

“Now that you mention it, I suppose that is a sorcerer’s garb... Boy, and here I was sure you were a waitress or a fishmonger or something...”

Urghblarghsplat!

I took another faceplant, this time right into my bowl. It was only then that I realized I hadn’t actually finished my soup.

“Whoa. I was only kidding... You sure have some great comedic timing, you know?”

“It’s not exactly intentional,” I said, wiping potage from my face with a handkerchief.

“So, just how powerful are you? Can you use Fireball? Based on your outfit, I’m guessing you’re a black magic user.”

There were, roughly speaking, three kinds of magic: black magic, white magic, and shamanistic magic, the latter of which comprised both elemental and spiritual spells. Black magic was definitely my specialty, but don’t go getting the wrong idea; there were basically two main types of black magic, too. One was curses. The other was attack spells that didn’t fall under the purview of shamanistic magic—and *that* was my forte.

The “Fireball” spell Gourry had mentioned was an elemental fire spell, which meant it fell under shamanistic magic. Most people assumed all offensive spells were black magic, but that was a popular misconception.

“You think a sorcerer would reveal her secrets so easily?”

“Well, you just seem like the type who likes to talk about herself...”

Excuse me!

“Well, no matter. I’ll get to see you in action soon

enough.”

I was about to ask what made him think that, but before I got the chance, someone barged into the tavern.

“That’s her!”

I looked to see who was shouting, and... Ah, crap. He was unmistakably pointing at me. I mean, he was actually pointing at our table. But because he’d said “her,” I just kind of assumed that meant me and not Gourry. (I don’t think anyone could mistake him for a girl, more’s the pity.)

A moment later, the room was filled with trolls. I thought at first that their leader was a mummy, but upon closer inspection, he was clearly just a sorcerer wrapped head-to-toe in bandages.

“Golly, I think you’ve got the wrong gal!” I quickly balled my fists up under my chin and went into cutesy mode. I threw in a fake name for good measure. “You just couldn’t be looking for sweet li’l Sofia!”

“Shut up! I don’t care what your name is! You’re the one who raided that bandit camp the other day, aren’t you?!”

Wuh-oh.

“Hey, hey now...” Gourry looked at me reproachfully.

“Look, I’ll explain later. For now, let’s just take care of these guys,” I said, turning to size up the trolls.

Trolls are considerably larger than humans with strength and toughness to match, but they’re also pretty agile for their size. A troll’s greatest asset, however, is its incredible regenerative powers. Any nonlethal wounds they take will heal right before your eyes. Translation: Kill them in one hit, or else.

That said, if I got too reckless with magic, I could blow up the inn and hurt a whole bunch of innocent people in the process.

“Okay, you got me,” I declared, kicking back my chair as I stood up. “Let’s settle this outside.”

“No way,” the mummy man instantly refuted.

“Oh, come on...”

I'd have to think on my feet and come up with a new idea lickety-split.

"If you return everything you stole, I could be convinced to call it even," the mummy man offered.

"Oh, please. You think I'll just let you walk off with my stuff? Check yourself, sorcerer thief."

"You're a sorcerer thief too," Gourry interjected.

"Shut up. I only steal from bad guys," I quibbled pointlessly as I prepared myself for battle.

"Get her!"

At the mummy man's signal, the trolls leaped at me. I moved as soon as they did.

A troll's main weapons are their sharp claws and extreme strength. It wasn't pleasant to think about, but while my outfit provided me basic protection, I knew that one rake from those nasty troll claws would send my guts spilling all over the floor. One punch would knock my head clean off, too.

Of course, I had no intention of letting that happen.

The first troll came at me with a big, wide swing. I dodged, then planted my right hand on the troll's back, using that as a fulcrum to spin past it and on to the next one. As this one reached out to grab me, I slid under it, grabbing one of its legs as I slipped between them. Obviously it wasn't enough to topple the troll, but I did make it lose its balance for a second. I used the opportunity to right myself and head for the next one.

All of a sudden, I could feel a hostile presence behind me. Not a second later, a set of claws snagged my cape. Unfortunately for the troll, my cape was all it got—I'd unfastened it from my pauldrons a split second earlier.

Nice thinking, Lina!

The momentum of the troll's swipe got it tangled up in my cape and caused it to fall awkwardly onto the floor. I gently poked it in the head with my finger. On to the next target!

After a little more of this and that, I found myself back at

Gourry's side.

"Hey, welcome back."

"Gee, thanks!"

This big lummoX had just been sitting there watching the whole time, not bothering to lift a single finger to help a lovely lady who was struggling. (I mean *me*, you jerks!) The nerve...

I'd hardly done any damage to the trolls in my little jaunt. In fact, I hadn't taken out a single one of them.

"Slippery little minx..." the mummy man muttered in irritation.

Guess I must've really gotten under his skin.

"Gourry! Can you wound the trolls?" I asked sharply.

"Wound them? Um... you know they regenerate, right?"

"Of course I know! Just do it! Hurry!"

"Any old wound will do?"

"Yes!" I shouted.

The trolls were getting closer by the second.

"Okay, got it."

Once he agreed to help, Gourry pulled his right hand out of his pocket. In it, I could see some nuts he must have plucked from trees on the way here—you know, the small, tough kind that squirrels love gnawing on. But the next thing I saw was a flick of Gourry's hand and the nuts were gone.

"Urk!"

"Yow!"

The trolls were suddenly groaning and clutching various parts of their bodies—their arms, their sides, their foreheads. It was some genuinely impressive sniping. He'd propelled the nuts so hard that they'd pierced the trolls' thick hides and embedded themselves deep into their flesh. Talk about incredible power; against a human opponent, a few hits like that could be lethal.

"Clever trick, child. But if you think that's enough to defeat a troll—" the mummy man started to boast, but was

interrupted mid-sentence.

“Grrragh!”

The trolls were screaming now. The acorn-sized wounds Gourry had inflicted on them were growing bigger and bigger as we spoke.

“What... What the heck? What’s happening?!” the mummy man shouted in confused desperation.

Gourry, too, could only watch slack-jawed as the wounds continued to expand in all directions. Some of the trolls were ripped in two at the waist, while others were bisected vertically. Once it was all said and done, more than half of the trolls had been reduced to nothing more than masses of dead flesh.

This was my handiwork, of course, but it wasn’t exactly a joy to look at. Good thing I’d already eaten, y’know? Gross!

Anyway, that left four trolls and the mummy man standing. Most of them looked less than thrilled about the prospect of rushing back into the fight. The panic and confusion over what I’d just done had rattled them pretty good.

Fear of the unknown is a powerful thing—but nothing’s that scary once you know the trick behind it.

See, when I’d touched each of the trolls earlier, I’d cast a little spell on them—a kind of an inversion of the white magic spell “Recovery.” Recovery maxes out a person’s physical and spiritual regenerative powers, which encourages their wounds to heal. What I’d done was the opposite: *reversing* the body’s ability to heal. And as fast as possible, at that.

Of course, the trolls’ naturally potent regenerative abilities made the process even more intense. Reversed and amplified, said abilities would cause even the tiniest wound to tear their whole body apart.

By the way, this spell was another Lina original. It felt kind of... you know... evil, so I’d never used it in combat before. And while it had really done the trick scaring the hell

out of my enemies, I swore not to use it again. Another Sorcery 101 lesson: Never use spells that will haunt you in your dreams.

Anyway, I figured my dirty little trick would send them all running with their tails between their legs, but one of the trolls seemed determined to press its luck. In defiance of all good sense, it actually charged right at me.

I drew my shortsword and sprang into action while chanting a hushed spell under my breath. I may be small, but I had agility on my side. My blade clashed with its claws two, then three times, leaving the troll vulnerable for a split second.

“Now!”

I buried my sword deep into the troll’s side. The troll, however, sneered with a smirk that just screamed, “Gotcha!”

I’d done exactly what it was hoping for. It knew it couldn’t outmaneuver me, so it had intentionally given me an opening to stab it. And with my sword stuck in its hide, I was a sitting duck. A play like that would have been suicide for most, but with a troll’s regeneration, it was a valid strategy.

Too bad it wouldn’t really work on me. I let the troll enjoy its little moment of triumph... and then I put an end to things.

“Come, lightning!”

I channeled a Monovolt spell through my sword and into the troll, who never stood a chance. Its enormous body went into convulsions, and the poor sap was dead before it could even scream.

“It was a clever plan, but I’d say I did you one better.”

The troll’s corpse fell to the floor with a thud, and I decided it was time to make sure the baddies knew who was in charge here... in case it wasn’t clear already.

“Okay. It’s time to get serious.”

I clapped my hands together in front of my chest and slowly began to pull them apart, chanting all the while. A sphere of glowing light appeared between my palms, its

iridescent flicker growing as I moved my hands further and further apart.

“Ack! A Fireball!” the mummy man shouted in desperate panic, his eyes wide. “Withdraw! Withdraw!”

And with that, he scrambled away with the remaining trolls in tow. I let out a relieved sigh, still holding the glowing ball of light in my hands.

“Hey, you’re not done yet! What about that Fireball?!” Gourry shouted while backing away swiftly.

I guess even a lummox like him knew how dangerous a Fireball was. See, Fireball’s a pretty popular offensive spell. The caster summons a ball of light which, when thrown, bursts upon impact and scatters fire everywhere. Pretty handy for taking out large groups at once. The actual damage it does varies a lot based on the user’s skill, but a direct hit can roast a human medium rare, easy.

“Hmm...”

I scrutinized the ball in my hands before abruptly tossing it up into the air.



The entire tavern let out a collective shriek before everything fell silent.

Eventually, Gourry looked up timidly.

"That wasn't Fireball," I explained with a mischievous smile, pointing up at the glowing ball now raining light from the ceiling. "It was just a Lighting spell."

"And what are you going to do about all this?!"

The innkeeper was furious, although I couldn't blame him. Tables and chairs were in splinters, troll corpses littered the floor, and the whole joint reeked of blood.

The Lighting I'd conjured as a mock-Fireball had been my undoing. The troll remains, previously obfuscated by the dim lamplight, were now illuminated for everyone to see in all their slushy, pulpy, disgusting glory...

And I gotta tell ya, it was one hell of a splatter.

"Grotesque" doesn't even begin to describe it. If you've ever worked at a butcher shop or seen an animal hit by a carriage, try to conjure that image in your mind for me. Got it? Yeah, this was a hundred times worse.

It definitely put a damper on the whole "come here for a good time and a good meal" atmosphere the tavern had going for it. Unable to take the new, uh, decor, about half the inn's customers had already packed their bags and left. So, really, I could understand why the innkeeper was mad. Anyone capable of grinning and bearing something like this had missed their true calling; they should quit their jobs immediately and become holy men or hermits.

Still, I wasn't going to take this lying down. I mustered my best puppy dog eyes. After magic, playing cute is my greatest talent.

"I know I've caused you a lot of trouble. But..." There, I strategically looked up into the innkeeper's eyes and removed my gloves, then softened and pitched my voice up half an octave. "They would have killed us if I hadn't done anything..."

Aha, it was working! I could see his anger deflate into nothing more than a displeased frown.

“So...” I pulled three small gemstones from my pouch, keeping my hand tightly closed around them so that the innkeeper couldn’t see what I was holding. “If there’s any way I can make it up to you...”

I then took his right hand with my left, pressing the gemstones into his palm. I still didn’t let him see exactly what they were, but he could take a good guess based on how they felt in his hand.

Key point here: Never avert your gaze! A pretty girl staring into your eyes with her small, warm hands around yours (this was why I took my gloves off)... Surely you can imagine how enrapturing this all was to him.

“I know this isn’t nearly enough, but... it’s the best I can do,” I continued, timidly easing my hands away from his.

He looked down at first, but upon seeing exactly what he’d hoped to see in his hand, he clenched the stones tightly.

“Well... when you put it like that, I can’t be too hard on you. I’ll hire someone to clean this mess up, so you can head back to your room.”

Score!

I bowed to him modestly—several times—then returned to my room with Gourry, who’d gotten off without so much as a single unkind word. The innkeeper apparently assumed I was the one responsible for all this... and, to be fair, he wasn’t wrong.

I’d been in my share of barroom brawls. I’d get thrown out on my ear on occasion, but I could usually smooth things over like I’d just done. Feels like the minute you hand someone a few gemstones, they think you’re a golden goose. And who tosses out their chance at golden eggs?

That said, if I’m asked to leave, I do so without a fuss. It’s not like throwing a tantrum gets you anywhere in that kind of situation.

"I've gotta hand it to you. You've got serious balls," Gourry commented as I plopped down on my bed.

Pretty sharp of him to see through my act.

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked innocently.

...Wait a minute...

"Hey, Gourry! What are you doing in my room?!"

"You said you'd explain later, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

"You did."

Ah, fine. I had a few things I wanted to ask him too anyway.

"Okay, I'll explain. But I need you to answer me something first."

"Sure thing. What is it, little miss?"

"Actually, about the whole 'little miss' thing— No, never mind. Just sit down already."

Gourry took a seat in the chair at the table, facing me.

"Okay, I'm sitting."

"All right, here goes..." I stared at him long and hard.

"Could you ever come to care for a girl like me?"

Man, you shoulda seen him freeze up! It was pretty funny... but I couldn't just leave him like that.

"Just kidding! Just kidding!" I reassured him.

"Spare me the bad jokes," he said with a long sigh. "You nearly gave me a heart attack..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing... Now, what's your real question? And just so you know, I never reveal my measurements."

Apparently, it was his turn to dish out the stupid jokes.

"Don't be a weenie. Okay, here's my real question: How did you know those guys were after me?"

"I didn't," he said simply.

"Then what about what you said right before they busted into the inn? 'I'll get to see you in action soon enough.'"

"Oh, that," he said flippantly. "I could feel an aura of menace around the inn. That meant someone outside was

after someone inside. If it'd been burglars, they would've come in the middle of the night instead."

"So what made you think they were after me specifically? Don't tell me you're working with them..."

"Let me finish already. I just figured that no matter who it was or what they were after, you'd end up getting involved regardless. You seem like a pretty soft touch, and more importantly, like someone who loves sticking her nose where it doesn't belong."

Er, I didn't have a comeback for that one. He was spot on. Actually, I'll leave it to you to decide whether I'm really a soft touch or not, but it's 100 percent true that I love sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. My big sister back home used to say that about me all the time.

"So that's that, then. Satisfied?"

"I suppose..."

"Now, do you have any other questions for me?"

"No..."

"Then it's your turn to explain. What did you do to them, and why are they after you?"

I let out a sigh.

"Fine, I'll tell you."

I then gave him the rundown of how I'd ended up here.

It all started when I'd heard some local villages were suffering under the bandits' reign of terror, so I went to put a stop to it. Then, while I was gathering up the loot they'd stolen, I skimmed a little off the top for myself. You know, like a commission. Apparently the bandits didn't much care for that, and they'd been chasing me around ever since.

What's that, you say? "I thought you attacked them because you were bored and broke?" Keep it down! That part's just between us!

Okay, fine, so I was lying to Gourry. But what's a story without a little artistic license, huh?

Anyway, once I finished telling Gourry my tale, he nodded thoughtfully.

"Hmm. Aside from the 'doing it to help the villagers' part, that all seems quite plausible."

Erk! He really was sharp...

"Anyway, this has confirmed something for me too," I said, quickly changing the subject.

"What?" Gourry asked curiously.

Not that I'd actually piqued his interest; I think he was just indulging me.

"I'm pretty sure they never saw my face when I attacked their base. Yet somehow they've been tracking me all this time. I thought that was weird, but lo and behold, they have a sorcerer on their side."

"The guy wrapped in bandages?"

"Yeah. I bet he was injured during my raid, so he's been out of action until today."

"And he's using magic to track you?"

"Exactly."

"Huh... Magic really can do anything."

"Not *anything*, really. There are things it can and can't do. It's more likely that the mummy man put a marking spell on one of the items I stole—or maybe all of them—and that's what he's been using to track me. Not even the best sorcerers can track someone down without any clues whatsoever, after all."

"Oh, really?" Gourry asked, though he still sounded confused.

"Yes, really. Now, any more questions?"

"No, teacher."

"Good. Then today's—"

I was going to say "today's lesson is over," but before I could land the joke, there was a knock at the door. Gourry and I both sprang into action, taking up positions on either side of it. Gourry reached out and put his hand on the knob.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"I came to make a deal. You have something in your possession that I want to buy. You name the price," the

visitor said from the other side of the door.

"I don't believe you."

"I'm not surprised. I wouldn't believe me, either. You'd have to be crazy to let someone into your room under the circumstances."

Wow, really?

"Uh, thanks? I'll be taking that advice and not letting you in, then."

"Wait a minute! I know this sounds suspicious, but for the moment, I mean you no harm."

Way to be obvious there, buddy...

"And your goodwill's gonna expire *the moment* you step inside, right?!"

"I realize that it's fruitless to tell you not to worry. But you have that impressive bodyguard of yours in there, don't you?"

Gourry and I looked at each other.

"Just so you know... if you try anything fishy, I'll personally show you the biggest attack spell I've got," I warned the visitor.

"Wait, you're letting him in?!" Gourry panicked.

"Don't worry. I've got my impressive bodyguard in here, don't I?" I said with a wink.

I then stepped away from the door and moved to the back of the room.

"Okay, we're opening the door now. Come in quietly and don't make any sudden moves. Do it, Gourry."

After a moment's hesitation, he complied and slowly opened the door.

The visitor entered...

2: Bad Guys Come, Even When You Most Expect Them

Well, our visitor sure *looked* suspicious. He was clad head to toe in white: white cape, white robe, and a white hood drawn so tight around his face that I could only make out his eyes. And he wasn't alone.

"Well, well..."

I didn't bother to hide my change in expression when I saw he was with the mummy man who'd sicced the trolls on me earlier. The two of them slowly stepped into the room. The mummy man was limping a little.

Gourry closed the door behind them. The mummy man looked over his shoulder in alarm, but the man in white was completely unfazed. They came to a stop in the center of the room, with Gourry and me flanking them.

"So you and Mummy Man here know each other, huh?" I said.

"Mum—!"

The mummy man's eyes went wide in outrage, but before he could lay into me, the man in white stopped him.

"He sure knows how to make a strong first impression," I added.

"I'm sorry about that," replied the man in white. "His name is Zolf. He takes his responsibilities very seriously, but that inclines him to impulsiveness at times... I hope you can forgive him."

"Sure, but it's still gonna factor into my price."

It didn't dawn on me until about this point in the conversation that the man in white wasn't human. I hadn't noticed before in the dim lamplight, but what I could see of

the area around his eyes looked like it was something more solid than skin. I mean, I wasn't about to reach out and touch it, so I couldn't be certain... but it sure looked like it was stone or something.

I thought he might be a golem for a second, but I dismissed that theory quickly. Golems were created to serve humans, and this man had the glint of self-determination in his eyes.

"Very shrewd of you... but fine. Let's negotiate," he said.

"Okay. You want to buy something off me, right?"

"Yes. Something you took from a bandit hideout a while back."

"What *something*, exactly?"

"I can't say."

"You can't say?" I questioned with a scowl.

"No, I cannot."

"This isn't how buying things works, in my experience..."

"Just hear me out. If I start by telling you what I want, you might try to overcharge me. Or you might get curious about why I want it and then refuse to sell, no? So here's my offer: Put a price on all the items you've acquired recently. Then we'll pay your asking price for the particular one we want."

"I think I get it. But I've gotta say, you don't really look like the type to be buddying up with bandits..."

"I've been looking for this item for some time," the man in white said. "Zolf was one of several men I sent to search it out. He infiltrated that bandit gang, and one day, they stumbled upon the item in question. Zolf had the bandits steal it, and he planned to make off with it and bring it to me at his next opportunity."

"But then I showed up, huh?"

"Precisely."

"Still, using bandits to steal something, only to run off with it yourself... That's kinda petty, don't you think?"

"You're one to talk about pettiness."

Ahem!

“Well, your terms seem fair, at any rate. Let’s get down to business. My inventory consists of a statue, a knife, and a couple of old coins. I’ve got some gemstones too, but I figure we can leave those out of this. It’s clear they’re just ordinary gems; no one would let me name my price for them.”

The man in white nodded in agreement.

“Okay, let’s see here. Starting with the knife...”

I proceeded to set a price for each item, as requested. The man in white took a few staggering steps backward, the mummy man’s eyes shot wide open, and Gourry’s jaw went slack.

Men! They’ve got no guts and no balls. If you let the seller set the prices, you’d better be ready to pay a hundred times market value!

Actually... I just realized I’d inadvertently asked for about enough to buy myself a whole furnished castle. Whoopsie! Hahaha.

“I was prepared to pay double or triple the market price, but...” the man in white managed to stammer after a few moments.

“Yeeeah, I guess a hundredfold markup is a little outrageous. Aha, hahaha...”

“You didn’t even realize what you were asking?” the man in white asked, exasperated.

“Anyway, since that’s definitely too high... slash everything I just said in half.”

“Only in half?!”

“Th-This little brat is trying to take us to the cleaners!”

“Shut up, Zolf.”

Brat?! Rrgh!

Ooh, there goes that temper of mine again...

“I don’t suppose you’d agree to an installment plan or be willing to send an invoice later?”

“In your dreams. Why would I accept stupid conditions *on top of* the grief of being called a brat by a third-rate sorcerer who can’t tell Fireball from Lighting?”

“Wh-What?!” Apparently Mummy Man was just now realizing how he’d been duped. “I called you a brat because that’s exactly what you are! You little—”

“Zolf! That’s enough!” The man in white scolded Mummy Man so harshly that it left him shaking in his bandages. “All right, here’s my final offer. Would you work with me? In one year’s time—no, in half that—I can pay you two to three times your original asking price.”

“Hmm.” I folded my arms. “Seems like you want whatever this thing is pretty bad... So I bet if I say no, I go right from bargaining partner to enemy, right?”

The man in white didn’t respond beyond slightly arching one eyebrow.

“As for me, I’d like to limit my dealings with your ilk as much as possible. I can’t exactly say why... Let’s just call it women’s intuition.”

“Hmm.”

“And right now, my intuition is telling me that I’d be better off dead than working with you.”

Zolf leaned forward angrily. He clearly had something to say, but he stopped dead in his tracks mid-breath. He seemed to lose his nerve the second he noticed the air of hostility swirling between me and his companion. The sheer force of the man in white’s aura told me that he wasn’t someone to be trifled with.

Our staring contest lasted a few good seconds, but it was the man in white who eventually backed down. He let out a deep sigh.

“We’re at an impasse, then... But I suppose that’s life, strong-willed girl.”

“Yeah, it’s too bad.”

“I will withdraw peacefully for today, as promised. But I will return to take the item, by force if necessary. The second you leave this inn tomorrow morning, you and I are enemies.”

I gave him a small nod. He then turned to leave.

"Let's go, Zolf."

"B-But..."

The man in white ignored Zolf's protests and made for the door. Gourry opened it just in time. Zolf lingered a minute, then hurried after his companion.

"Oh, I forgot to mention..." Just on the other side of the door, the man in white stopped and said without turning back, "My name is Zelgadis."

"I'll remember that."

Gourry promptly shut the door behind our visitors.

"They're gone," he said after a few minutes. "So, why'd you put those outrageous prices on everything?"

"Would you have been happier if I'd sold them what they wanted at a reasonable price?"

With a wry smile, Gourry shook his head.

"Ahh, what nice weather..."

I was currently stretched out on the ground, gazing up at a perfectly clear sky.

The sunlight was like heaven, warm and toasty. The road we'd been following mostly ran through forest, but we'd come out into a relatively open plain for now. The sky was bright blue, the birds were singing, and... the smell of blood was in the air.

"It doesn't get much better than this..." I murmured.

"Say, Lina..." Gourry said, heaving for breath as he collapsed next to me. "You can't just leave a guy to do all the fighting... while you lounge around enjoying yourself..."

I glanced back at the mounds of berserker corpses Gourry had left in his wake.

"Aha, sorry 'bout that. But hey, I did chip in a little..."

"Only at the start and only a tiny bit. But then, instead of casting even one attack spell to help me out, you just said, 'You take it from here.'"

"...Yeah, I guess I might've done that."

"No, you definitely did," Gourry argued, using his sword

to struggle to his feet.

"You should rest a little while longer," I encouraged, but Gourry shook his head.

"We need to reach the next town by nightfall or they'll come after us again. Let's get moving."

I couldn't blame him for being frustrated. I'm sure he wasn't pleased that I'd sat the fight out, and his own exhaustion seemed to be fouling up his mood. But I continued to just lie there instead of responding.

"Lina," he said in the tone of a scolding father as he walked up to me with surprisingly steady legs.

"C'mon, just a little longer. The sun feels so nice..."

"Enough already!" he shouted, grabbing my right arm and yanking.

No, not that!

"Urgh!" I unwittingly groaned in agony.

"Huh?" Gourry stammered as he released me.

I curled up into a fetal position, pressing my forehead against the ground. I don't like to admit this, but I have a really low pain tolerance.

I whispered a faltering Recovery spell, focusing the power in my right hand into my wound. Bit by bit, the pain began to recede. Normally a wound this size would've healed a lot faster, but this one was especially slow going. I had to wonder...

"...Lina?"

"Hmm?"

I looked up at Gourry, trying to remain as calm as I could... even though I knew there was no hiding it now.

"Are you... hurt?" he asked.

I gave him a little smile, which probably didn't do much to reassure him.

"Just ate too much."

Gourry moved around in front of me, sat down, and looked at me hard.

"...What?"

I stared into his eyes. He stared back into mine.

"Urgh!"

I groaned again as a new jolt of pain ran through me. Gourry had thrust his hand into my cape, incidentally brushing the wound on my right side. He quickly pulled his hand back when he saw how I responded, however.

"You..." he whispered in a hushed voice. "You're covered in blood..."

"...I'm fine."

I was doing my best to grin and bear it, but I was also telling the truth. The pain was still steadily receding.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I said I was, so I am. I've got a Recovery spell going, so the wound will close soon."

"But..."

"You know, this is exactly the kind of fuss that I was trying to avoid when I decided to 'loungue around enjoying myself.'"

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. But I really will be better soon, so you should take it easy until then too."

"S-Sure..."

Gourry obediently sat down again in front of me, his eyes alight with worry. I appreciated the concern and all, but I'd never exactly been comfortable with this kind of attention.

"So you were wounded at the start of the fight?" Gourry asked.

"I underestimated them, yeah."

"Then you were focusing on your healing... I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions."

"I told you, it's fine."

Gourry said nothing more after that. We stayed put for a while, simply letting the breeze blow past us.

"So, about what those guys are after..." I finally spoke up, breaking the silence. "After we parted ways last night, I looked into a few things."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. Remember what I said yesterday? About how the mummy man had probably marked the item with magic?”

“Did you figure out what it was?”

I disappointedly shook my head.

“What I swiped from the bandits included an orichalcum statue, a large knife with an enchanted blade, and a few gold coins that would make a collector go bug-eyed. None of it had a marking spell on it.”

“But then...”

“That means it’s safe to rule out the coins; they’re not innately trackable. That leaves the knife and the statue.”

“Isn’t all this talking irritating your wound?”

“Huh? Oh... No, I’m fine now. I’m nearly all healed up.”

“Nearly?”

“I’m fine, really. Now, as for what we have left, the knife’s enchantment... is kinda nasty, but it’s trackable. On the other hand, the statue is made of a metal called orichalcum, which has some degree of magic-sealing properties.”

“So it’s not trackable, then?”

“It is, actually. When you run a search on the astral plane, the spiritual waves traveling in the direction the metal lies in — Are you following any of this?”

“Nope.”

“Well, the point is that the statue is indeed trackable too.”

“Then it has to be one or the other, right? But why are those guys so desperate to get their hands on it?”

“That’s the question, yeah. I’m still working on that. Orichalcum is a ton more valuable than gold, and the enchanted knife is a real piece of work. Yet neither object is worth the trouble they’re putting themselves through to nab.”

“They even said they’d pay you triple your asking price in six months, which tells us just how much it’s worth to them. Maybe it contains the location of a big hidden treasure or something.”

A somewhat whimsical theory, but not impossible.

"Or perhaps it's a key of some kind," I added.

"A key?" Gourry asked, looking at me quizzically.

"With certain applications of magic, you can turn something into a key. I've heard of noble estates in the City of Magic that are rigged up that way. If a young woman enters a fountain in the courtyard, for example, it opens up the door to the treasure vault or something... In that instance, the young woman is the key."

"So the key doesn't have to be magical itself?"

"Exactly."

"So either the statue or the knife..."

"...might unlock something. That's one possibility, at least."

"I don't feel like we've narrowed this down at all."

"We're still short on clues. Ah, here we go..."

There, I managed to pick myself up. My legs still felt a little unsteady, but I could walk, at least.

"Hey now..."

"I'm fine. I swear. I'm just a little tired. But we'd better get going, right?"

Gourry looked at me disapprovingly as he stood up, and then...

"Yeek!"

I let out a little shriek as he swept me up into his arms.

"H-Hey! What are you doing?" I shouted, well aware I'd turned beet red.

"I'll carry you awhile. I don't think you're in any condition to be moving around on your own."

"I told you that I'm fine! And you're still pretty wiped out, aren't you?"

"My grandmother always told me to be kind to children," Gourry said with a wink.

There were footsteps out in the hall. And I wasn't just hearing things.

I'd been resting in bed at the inn for a while now, and

despite being tired, my churning thoughts were making it hard to sleep. That restlessness might have just saved my life, however. These weren't the footsteps of a drunk old man heading back to his room after a nightcap. It was a group, trying as hard as they could to not make a sound.

I sat up in bed. There was no way to know for sure that I was the one these intruders were after, but given recent events, it seemed pretty likely. I decided to play it safe and prepare for the worst.

Little by little, the footsteps drew nearer.

I grabbed my cape hanging next to the bed. As a precaution for times just like these, it was the only thing I took off when I slept.

I silently made my move. Soon after, the footsteps stopped. Right outside my room. Just as I'd suspected.

Suddenly, the door burst open and a group of strange figures poured into the room. They were expecting me to be in bed, so when I wasn't there, it threw them into confusion.

"Where is she?!" one of the intruders shouted.

"*Right here!*" was what I wanted to say, but decided against it.

Instead, I simply stood up. It probably sounds a little silly, but I'd actually only been sitting next to the door. Sitting wasn't all I was doing, though—I was preparing.

My chant was now complete. I took my hands, held close together in front of my chest, and slowly pulled them away from each other. In the space between them, a glowing ball of light appeared.

This one wasn't a Lighting spell. It was an honest-to-goodness Fireball!

The intruders whipped around in a panic, but it was too late. I unleashed the Fireball on the room as I ran into the hall (which I'd checked in advance to make sure it was assassin-free) and shut the door behind me. A Fireball going off in an enclosed space tends to be about twice as destructive as the regular deal.

Bwoom!

Right on cue, there was an impressive-sounding explosion inside the room. When I'm in top form, a direct hit from my Fireball can melt iron. But...

"What? What's going on?!" Gourry said as he flew out of his room next door. Typical mercenary; he'd apparently had the same idea I did and slept in his usual gear, sword and all.

"Assassins!" I shouted.

With that one word, he was up to speed on the situation.

"Did you get them?" he asked.

"I don't know!" I answered honestly.

If this had happened yesterday, I could have replied with more confidence. But as I suspected...

The second I said that, the door to my room burst open. The strange figures came running out, wreathed in flames and smelling of char.

"Tsk!"

Gourry immediately drew his sword and tore into the intruders, dropping one of them in a flash. I could see now that they were mostly trolls, armed with swords and simple armor.

Not good!

Gourry sliced at a second intruder, but even with smoke still rising from his body... he managed to block Gourry's sword with his own. And that was no mean feat. This guy—a well-built middle-aged man who was the only human in the bunch—must have had some real skill.

"Are you with her, young man?" he asked.

"You're not bad, old man," Gourry responded.

"I'd better be after all these years."

Both of them jumped back at the same time.

The troll Gourry had cut down a minute ago was already slowly getting back on its feet. Their regenerative powers were really something to behold... but I didn't really have time to sit around and enjoy the show. We were in a pretty

dicey situation here, no matter how you sliced it.

Since Gourry was occupied with the old man, handling the trolls fell to me. Gourry was talented with a blade, but the old man was nothing to sneeze at either. He was keeping Gourry too busy to help me out any.

Unfortunately, there was no way I could defeat the trolls by myself right now. My magic was in a sorry state.

Any other night, I'd have polished them off before Gourry was even out of his room. He'd say, "Did you get them?" And I'd wink and say, "Easy-peasy!" Then we'd clean up the aftermath of my Fireball, and that would be that, but...

Sadly, here in reality, all I'd done was scorch the assassins' clothing and singe off their eyebrows. Otherwise, they were still in perfect fighting form.

I couldn't deal a fatal blow with my magic right now, and my sword wouldn't be much use either. I'm a pretty good swordfighter—maybe even as good as Gourry—but only against human opponents. As I mentioned before, when fighting trolls, you have to take them out with one strike... say, by lopping off their heads, for example. But while I might know how to get my sword up against a troll's neck, I didn't have the power to seal the deal. I needed to decapitate them in one strike.

And if I couldn't do that, then I'd just have to fight smart.

My plan was to leave the real fighting to Gourry while I used some cheap magic tricks to distract the baddies and back him up. The narrow hallway we were in would keep them from all crowding him at once, so we needed to take advantage of that and thin their numbers one by one.

That was pretty much our only option. It was gonna be annoying, but... Ugh. So be it!

"All right, here we go."

But just as I was getting ready to roll...

The trolls suddenly froze in place. The old man fighting Gourry suddenly stopped too, just standing there stock-still. The light had left their eyes.

Ah, this was a “Marionette” spell.

It wasn't a particularly difficult spell, and it was no surprise to see simple creatures like trolls falling prey to it. That said, the man who'd succumbed to it along with them was another story. Humans were a bit more complex, after all. Meaning... there had to be an exceptional caster behind this.

Your typical Marionette spell typically only worked on one target, and even then, casting it required a certain amount of time and materials. To take over this many people, and to do it instantaneously... The caster must have specifically studied how to apply the spell to large groups. Maybe next time I had time to kill, I'd give it a try myself.

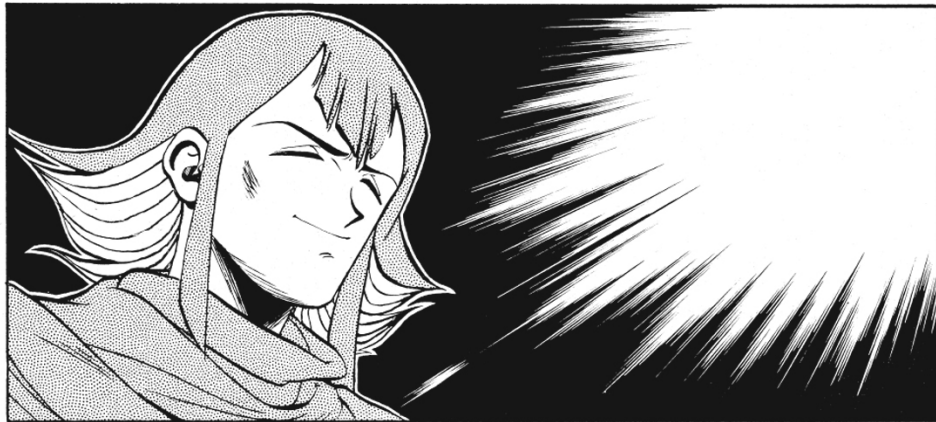
“What's with them?” Gourry asked.

“I cast a minor spell on them,” someone answered.

And no, it wasn't me.

“I don't know who started things here, but I'm afraid all this noise will bother the other patrons,” said the same voice.

I looked down the hall, past the trolls, and spotted a priest. He was standing there so silently that there was no telling when he'd arrived on the scene.



His face was porcelain white and seemed to radiate benevolence. His age was hard to read; he looked simultaneously young and old. His eyes were firmly closed—was he blind?

The most interesting thing about him, though, was his outfit. He was definitely wearing a priest's robes, but every thread of them was red. Typically, priests wore white. Some might wear lavender or jade depending on where they hailed from and what god they worshiped, but either way, they still tended to prefer muted colors.

Meanwhile, this man's robes were such a deep red that it looked as though they'd been woven out of blood itself. Perhaps they just seemed especially striking in the dim lamplight of the hall...

"Thank you. You really saved us," I said. "May I ask who you are?"

"Ah... a mere lodger at this inn, no different than yourselves. I heard the footsteps of intruders approaching, so I thought I'd poke my nose where it didn't belong..."

"You've found a kindred spirit," Gourry muttered sarcastically.

I glared daggers back at him. This was supposed to be a serious scene!

"Are you also the one who cast the Sleeping spell on the other lodgers here?"

"You could tell?" he asked in turn, sounding impressed.

Ha! Don't underestimate me!

"Call it an educated guess. I mean, all this noise and nobody came looking?"

"Innocents flooding the halls only would have made things worse. There was no reason for them to get involved."

"What about you?"

At that, the priest snapped his fingers. The trolls and the old man immediately filed out the exit, zombie-like.

"Judging from their makeup," he said, "I would assume Zalgadis sent them."

"You know that guy?"

"But of course," the priest answered with a nod. "He seeks to use something in your possession to revive Dark Lord Shabranigdu. He is my enemy."

Now *that* was a bombshell!

"Huh? Who's Sha... Shara... whatever he just said?" Gourry asked.

"I'll explain later," I hissed before turning back to the priest. "Are you certain?"

"There can be no mistaking it. Zelgadis transformed himself into a mixture of human, golem, and brow daemon. He seeks to revive the Dark Lord in order to acquire even greater power and cast the world into chaos."

"Why on earth would he do something like that?"

"I fear I know not," the priest answered with a shake of his head. "But what I do know for certain is that he's our common enemy."

Hmm...

"Our common enemy, huh? What is it that makes him *your* enemy, exactly?"

"Unworthy though I may be, I am still a priest. I cannot simply sit back and allow the Dark Lord to be revived."

"Hmm..."

I pensively folded my arms. Gourry just stood there, blankly staring into space.

"Are you proposing a team-up, then?" I asked.

"Certainly not," the priest denied quickly. "Can I assume that his minions are pursuing you because you unknowingly came into possession of the key to reviving the Dark Lord?"

"Seems that way."

"Would you give the key to me, then? That would free you of all this trouble."

"Wouldn't it be faster just to smash the thing?"

"Please, no!" the priest suddenly shouted. "That is precisely the action that would revive the Dark Lord!"

"But if I give the key to you, you'll have to fight off these

guys all by yourself.”

“Fear not. Impressive though their forces may be, I, Rezo, shall prove them more than a match.”

Rezo...?

“Hang on a minute! Are you Rezo the Red Priest?!” I shouted, suddenly realizing who this guy really was.

“That is one name I am known by, yes,” he admitted with a troubled smile.

Rezo the Red Priest... He was always clad in red robes and had spiritual power on par with the High Priest of Saillune. Yet rather than throwing his lot in with any particular kingdom, he simply traveled the world performing miracles. Or so the rumors said.

In addition to clerical white magic, he’d mastered both shamanistic and black magic too. He was hailed as one of the Five Great Sages of our day. There were just two things holding him back. One: He’d been born blind. Two: He *seriously* had the name of a villain. Even five-year-old children had heard of him.

I felt a tug on my cape. It was Gourry.

“Is this guy famous or something?” he whispered.

Seriously, dude?!

“I’ll explain later!” I snapped before recovering my calm and resuming my conversation with the priest. “We would be absolutely honored to fight them with you, sir.”

“Er... Pardon?”

“After what you’ve told me, I couldn’t possibly lay the burden of such a dangerous item entirely on your shoulders.”

“Your consideration is appreciated, but—”

“Please, sir. It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just that if there’s a chance the Dark Lord might be revived, then this is my problem too. I realize my powers are trifling compared to yours, but if there’s any way I can help, I want to do so.”

“But—” the priest stammered, looking rather troubled.

“There’s absolutely no need to worry. I’m a fairly capable

sorcerer, and my companion here possesses incredible skill with a sword. I promise that we won't disappoint you."

"Very well," he said with a heavy sigh. "If you insist, then I accept."

"You mean...!"

"Indeed. Let us join forces."

"Yes, sir!"

Gourry tugged on my cape again, but I just ignored him.

"In that case, allow me to take the key into my custody," the priest offered.

I silently shook my head. The red priest looked wary.

"They aren't yet aware that we're working together. I'd like to ask that you let us act as bait while you support us from the shadows, sir."

"But... that would expose you to great danger. If someone is to draw their fire, then surely—"

"Please, sir. If you take the key, they'll realize we've been in contact. They'll assume we must have worked out a strategy, and that would defeat the point of having a decoy."

"That much is true, but—"

"Please. Have faith in me, sir."

It would take a real bozo to keep insisting after all that... So I guess Gourry might do it. Fortunately, however, this guy was smarter.

"Very well. I shall leave the key in your care, then," the priest conceded.

He then walked over to my door.

What in the world...?

He plucked a small orb-like object from his pocket, tossed it into the room, and closed the door. A quiet chant drifted from his lips. It sounded a bit like a Resurrection spell, but not quite.

And when he was done chanting, that was that. It didn't seem like anything had happened, but...

"Now, I shall return to my own room. Tomorrow, as we agreed, I shall begin aiding you from the shadows.

Goodnight to you both," he said, and then walked swiftly away.

"Huh. Your room looks normal to me," Gourry said as he poked his head through the doorway. "What'd that old guy think he was doing?"

"Let me see."

I poked my head in too, and...

Bwuh?!

I was stunned into silence. Gourry was right: the room was perfectly normal. Slightly disturbed bedclothes and cheap white curtains, all as it should be. Not a single thing was amiss. It looked exactly as it had before I threw that Fireball earlier.

I knew that I'd be getting an earful in the morning if the innkeeper found my room in cinders, so I'd been trying to figure out what to do about the damage, but this... I don't know how he'd done it, but Rezo the Red Priest had completely un-fried my room.

"...He sure makes an impact..."

"Huh? What did he hit?"

"Forget it, Gourry. We'll talk this over tomorrow. Let's call it a night. Don't wanna miss our beauty sleep..."

With that, I closed the door to my room, barged into Gourry's, and curled up in the corner.

"Hey! Little miss!" Gourry shouted after me. "This is *my* room!"

"I know that."

"..."

"If I go back to my room, I could end up getting jumped again."

"But if you stay here—"

"Then at least we're together, right?"

"...Fine. But sleep in the bed, at least. I'll take the floor."

"You know I can't do that. I'm the one imposing."

"Okay, fine."

Perhaps realizing it was pointless to argue, Gourry simply

plopped himself down on the floor on the other side of the room.

It was my turn to ask this time, "Why don't *you* sleep in the bed?"

"Stupid. What kind of man could take the bed while a young lady is sleeping on the floor?"

"Suit yourself," I said with a wry smile. "Goodnight, Gourry."

"Goodnight, little miss."

He'd really be a pretty great guy... if only he'd stop treating me like a kid.

"You've honestly never heard of Dark Lord Shabranigdu?" I asked Gourry as we walked side by side down the sun-dappled forest road.

We'd been walking through the exact same kinds of trees for days now, so I was getting sick of the monotony, but oh well. The main road to Atlas City cut through Cheresus Forest, so it was no surprise that the scenery was so verdant most of the way there.

"Hmm..." Gourry thought long and hard for a few minutes. "No, I honestly never have."

The legend of Shabranigdu was rather famous, and not just among sorcerers. I thought everyone knew it, but...

I let out a sigh.

"Okay, fine. I'll start from the beginning. Just remember: this is legend, not history."

"Sure thing."

I let out another sigh, hoping I wasn't wasting my breath here.

"There are worlds out there besides the one we inhabit. Each of these worlds lies on top of a staff, which someone thrust into the Sea of Chaos ages and ages ago. Worlds are round and flat... Hmm, think of them like pies balanced atop fence posts. That's where we stand right now," I said, pointing to the ground for emphasis.

This was the broadly accepted theory among my fellow sorcerers, though I had my doubts about its veracity. Bringing that up would only confuse Gourry, however, so I refrained.

“Now, across the various worlds that exist, two breeds of beings have been battling it out since ancient times: gods and demons. Gods try to protect the worlds, while demons are out to destroy them in order to steal the staves that hold them up. In some instances, the gods won and brought peace to their world. In others, the demons won and destroyed their world. And in others still, this war is yet ongoing.

“Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu and Flare Dragon Ceifeed once fought for control of our world. Their battle raged on for centuries, for millennia even, until at last, Ceifeed cut the Dark Lord’s body into seven pieces and scattered them throughout the world, sealing them away.”

“So the god won?”

“Ceifeed only sealed Shabranigdu away. He didn’t destroy him,” I said, shaking my head.

“I thought he cut him into seven pieces?”

“You don’t earn the ‘Dark Lord’ moniker if you’re that easy to kill. Anyway, sealing away Shabranigdu consumed the last of the Flare Dragon’s power, and he plummeted into the Sea of Chaos.”

“That wasn’t very smart of him.”

“Don’t worry. That wasn’t all. Fearing that the Dark Lord might one day revive, the Flare Dragon created four clones of himself with the very last of his power—the Earthlord, the Airlord, the Flarelord, and the Aqualord—each of which was given dominion over a cardinal direction. They say this all happened five millennia ago, so let’s flash forward four—to a thousand years before the time we’re living in now.

“It was then that the very thing Ceifeed had feared came to fruition. One of the seven pieces of Shabranigdu revived, and then hijacked the body and soul of a human in an

attempt to resurrect himself. He set a trap for the Aqualord, protector of the North. They fought, and in the end, the Aqualord was destroyed. But Shabranigdu's body was also bound to the ground beneath his feet, effectively holding him in place."

"So neither really won."

"They were too evenly matched, yeah. Anyway, all of that upset the balance that kept the world at peace, which is what caused what I'll call 'beasts of the dark' to begin to appear."

"Huh..." Gourry sounded genuinely impressed.

Now, questions of accuracy about the exact details of the story aside... we knew for certain that something named Shabranigdu *did* exist long ago. Something powerful enough to unabashedly call itself "Dark Lord." We also knew that, far in the lands to the north, there was another "something" just like it. Maybe even made up of the same substance.

"So it sounds like this Zel... er, the white-cloaked guy... wants to revive Dark Lord Part-Two-of-Seven, right?"

"Seems so. Assuming Rezo the Red Priest was telling the truth, anyway."

"You know," Gourry said softly in the just-barely-audible voice he seemed to like so much. "For going all-in on politeness last night, you don't seem to trust this Rezo guy very much."

Another sharp observation.

"Aha, very astute of you," I said, joining him in a whisper. "For one thing, I've got no proof that he's actually Rezo. The dude is basically a walking legend, and allegedly no one's seen him for about ten years."

"So the man we met might be one of the bad guys who's only using Rezo's name to gain our trust?"

"Exactly."

"What does it mean that you trust *me*, then?"

"Maybe I don't," I said playfully.

"That's harsh..."

"I was only kidding. I've got a better eye for people than you might think."

"Thanks, little miss," Gourry said as he patted my head condescendingly.

Not this again, dammit!

"Quit treating me like a kid!" I barked. Though I'd actually gotten pretty used to this, so I wasn't as mad as all that.

"You keep saying that. How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty-five."

Gourry froze up, visibly stunned.

"Kidding! I'm really fifteen."

"Sheesh, don't scare me like that... But that makes sense. You're only fifteen, so you *are* still a kid."

"*Only* fifteen?! I'm... Okay, so maybe I'm not quite an adult, but I'm still not a kid anymore."

"It's a difficult age, yeah."

"I don't know what you're talking about... Oh, right, I almost forgot to mention." I'd gone back to talking in normal volume at some point, so I started whispering again. "I'm not going to be able to use my magic for a few days. I'll need you to handle most of the fighting in the meantime."

"You're not going to be able to use your magic?"

Gourry looked surprised, but he was at least smart enough to keep his volume appropriately low. I nodded firmly in response.

"Oh..." Gourry said thoughtfully. "That time of the month, huh?"

.....

"H-Hey, Gourry!" I snapped, my face flushed crimson.

"What?" he asked in complete obliviousness.

I was the one who had to look away in embarrassment.

"How... How do you know... about 'that time of the month'?"

The price a woman paid for the ability to have babies was being forced to undergo a little suffering once a month. For a few days around that special time, female sorcerers, shrine

maidens, and priestesses would feel their spiritual power wane, if they didn't lose it entirely.

Conventional wisdom taught that during such times we "lose our maidenhood" and become "ordinary women," but I didn't buy that for a second. I figure it's probably just an issue of spiritual focus.

I'd felt my powers weakening yesterday, so I figured it was on the way. Then lo and behold, right on schedule... Well, never mind about that part.

The question here was how Gourry, Mr. Ogrebrawn Slimebrain (a punchy appellation, if I do say so myself), managed to learn something as basic as "can't use magic" equals "that time of the month."

"It's not that big a deal," Gourry said. "When I was a kid... I guess I was around five, but there was this fortuneteller lady who lived nearby. Her shop would be closed a few days out of every month, and when I asked her why, she'd just laugh and say, 'It's that time of the month.' So I always figured that was code for not being able to use magic... but I guess it has some other meaning too? Can't you explain it to me, Lina? I don't get it."

"Why, you..."

I was starting to think this jerk really got off on teasing me!

"But all joking aside," Gourry said, suddenly stone-faced as he came to a stop. "I think it's time we got serious, little miss."

I followed suit and came to a stop too. To our right was dense underbrush and trees. To our left was an open clearing.

And dead ahead was a man standing in the middle of the road, blocking our path. He was wearing something like a coat, and he was rather good-looking. Probably around twenty years old, I'd say, give or take.

But... his skin was made of dark blue rock, and the hair on his head was silver and thick, almost as if the strands were

thousands of metal wires. He held a broadsword in his hand.
I recognized him immediately.

"So," Gourry opened. "Got tired of waiting and decided to show yourself, did you, Zegaldis?"

Hey!

"I think you mean Zeldigas, Gourry," I corrected him.

"It's Zelgadis," the man in question corrected us both.

"..."

"..."

Aaand there goes the mood! We were at risk of losing our building sense of tension. Better get things back on track!

"Yeah, Zelgadis! That's what I said!"

"M-Me too," Gourry insisted.

"Never mind about my name," the man remarked, clearly annoyed. "I'm going to ask you one more time to hand over that item. If you refuse, I'll have no choice but to take it by force. Now, which will it be, Sofia?"

Huh?

Gourry and I looked at each other for a second, and then...

"Oh!"

We both clapped our hands together in unison, suddenly realizing what was going on here. Zelgadis thought the fake name I'd given Mummy Man Zolf was my actual name.

"My name's Lina," I said.

"Huh?" Zelgadis scoffed, his jaw dropping in a way that seemed beneath his dignity.

"I'm Lina. Sofia was a fake name I gave that Zolf guy."

Zelgadis just stood there, unsure of how to react.

Looks like my plan to steal his thunder had worked! Okay, so it was more a thing I stumbled into than a plan, but just let me have this one, okay?

Now, while his guard was down—

"No one cares about your name," someone suddenly interjected.

This new voice came from behind us. I turned to see who it was and spotted a werewolf standing there.

Technically, werewolves are supposed to be half-wolf and half-human, but this one looked like a wolf—troll mix. I don't know what else to call him though, so I'm sticking with "werewolf." His face was predominantly lupine, and his body mostly humanoid. He was wearing leather armor for some reason (I don't know why) and carrying a big scimitar.

"We just have to swipe the statue from the girl, right, Boss Zel?"

"Dilgear!" Zelgadis shouted reproachfully.

The werewolf stared at Zelgadis for a long second, unsure why he was being yelled at.

"Oooh, you hadn't told them what you were after yet, huh? Well, it won't matter in the end. They're gonna die here either way."

"Don't be so sure," I said, taking a defiant step forward. "I don't know how tough you are, but you're no match for me regardless."

"Oho?" The werewolf narrowed his eyes. "Big talk from such a little girl. Let's see what you can do, then!"

"Happy to oblige. But two on two would be over too quickly to be any real fun. One of us is more than enough to handle both of you. Go get 'em, Gourry!"

"Gwuuuh?!" Gourry cried in an overly dramatic fashion. "Hang on now, little miss..."

"What?"

"No need to quarrel, you two," said yet another voice, although this one was familiar. "I'm here too."

Go figure. The third character to step out and join Zelgadis was the old man who'd been leading the armored trolls last night. Since we were outside today, he was carrying a halberd—presumably his real weapon of choice.

"Wait, three on one definitely isn't fair!" I shouted.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Gourry yelped in a panic.

Jeez, talk about a lack of inner calm... Though I guess a little panic *was* justified in this case.

"You got the drop on me with that strange spell of yours

last night, but you won't be so lucky today."

All right, so we might really be in trouble here. I was starting to think about how to cut our losses and run, when —

"Forget it! Attack!" Zelgadis called.

He made the first move, thrusting his right hand out and firing a dozen Flare Arrows from it.

"Tch!"

Gourry and I swiftly dove in opposite directions. The Flare Arrows tore through the ground where we'd been standing. Dust billowed outward from the impact, clouding our vision. This wasn't good. We'd been separated.

Through the smoke, I could hear the shrill cry of metal hitting metal. It sounded like Gourry was already clashing blades with one of them.

"Gourry!"

I called out to him, but when I did... I saw the flash of a blade.

"Uh-oh!"

I leaped backward and drew the sword on my hip.

"You seem to have skill," my attacker declared as the dust gradually settled. "Allow me to put it to the test!"

"Zelgadis!"

He let out a warcry as he sliced at me again. I moved to parry—

Clang!

The blow was so heavy, I almost dropped my sword.

Zelgadis was good. Each of his swings had just the right combination of power and speed behind it. My arms wouldn't last long blocking strikes like these.

I didn't want to admit it, but he was too much for me in my current state. Placing my bets on strategic retreat, I turned tail and dashed into the forest. Since I was the one he was really after, I knew that Zelgadis would follow me. I'd find a way to lose him in the woods, then return to the fray and give Gourry a hand.

At least, that was my plan. But I'd underestimated Zelgadis. He ran right into the forest after me. That much I'd expected, sure. The part I *didn't* see coming was him catching me instantly. Before I knew what was happening, he'd driven a knee into my solar plexus. I tried to swing my sword in a counterblow, but all I caught was empty air as I flew backward into a tree.

"You should... be more gentle with girls..." I wheezed, the wind knocked out of me.

I wasn't down and out just yet, but that blow had really done a number on me.

"I wouldn't have to be rough with you if you'd just give me what I'm after."

I got my bearings and slowly backed away. Zelgadis didn't close the distance, but instead just watched me carefully. I made my move and sprang into a run. Zelgadis gave chase. This was my chance!

"Light!" I shouted, tossing a Lighting spell behind me. Zelgadis charged right into it.

"Gwah!"

Obviously that wouldn't be enough to stop him, but it would at least blind him temporarily. Even in my current condition, I could still use minor magic like that. If I tried to cast Fireball, though, I wouldn't get so much as smoke.

I didn't bother to go on the offensive here. I had a feeling my sword wouldn't pierce that rocky skin of his, anyway. I just kept running.

The treeline came to an abrupt end and I found myself at a small lake, which wasn't good. There was nowhere to hide here. I turned back toward the forest, but Zelgadis was heading straight for me.

No choice...

I made the snap decision to cut around the lake.

"You won't escape!" Zelgadis cried.

I think he threw something at me. I zagged to the left to dodge without turning to see what it was, but...

Hey, why couldn't I move all of a sudden?! I looked down to see a small shard of metal impaling my shadow on the ground. Ah crap, shadow binding! This was a minor trick that still required some skill to use. It restricted a target's movements from the astral plane.

"But that won't stop me!"

I chanted another Lighting spell, shining the glowing ball downward. My shadow vanished and I regained my freedom, but it was too late.

I turned just in time to find Zelgadis upon me. And then...

3: Bad News! They Caught Me (Pretty Sad, I Know...)

I woke up somewhere completely unfamiliar. It looked like a room in some old abandoned church. The stained glass windows were so smashed up that I couldn't even tell what old legend they were supposed to be depicting, and the dingy walls were lined with statues of old, long forgotten holy figures. I briefly wondered if this might be karma in action for me... but I brushed the thought aside. This was no time for introspection!

The left side of my head was pounding, but on the bright side, at least that meant I wasn't dead! My captors had tied my hands together to dangle me from the ceiling. I could see Zelgadis standing in front of me alongside Zolf the mummy man. Dilgear the werewolf was with them too, as well as a fourth guy I'd never seen before.

The fourth guy was a fishman. And no, not the kind of Ragon or Gillman "just a normal dude covered in scales" type you're probably picturing. This guy was more like a fish with arms and legs. His body was almost completely flat. His big ol' fish head was flat too, with two large, glassy eyes on either side. He was covered with shiny, slimy scales, and his tiny mouth hung vacantly open. We're talking full-on fish face, here, okay? He was definitely not the kind of dude you wanted to see up close and personal if you had a bad heart.

The only person I didn't see around was the old fighter-type guy.

Anyway, Zelgadis was the first to say anything.

"You sure didn't put up much of a fight, young lady."

Lay off, buddy!

"You should thank Zolf. I wanted to kill you, but he asked that we bring you here alive."

"Gee, thanks a bunch!" I said with an airy laugh.

"Hmm... You don't seem particularly distressed," commented Zolf.

"Forgot about me. Where's my companion?" I asked.

"That man? He buggered off and left you behind. You got dumped, kid," sneered Dilgear.

"Oh? Too bad for you, huh?" I scoffed.

"Indeed," Zelgadis sighed. "I didn't expect you to leave it with him... but that means keeping you alive was the right thing to do. After all, he might still return to save you."

"Hey, what're you talking about?" Dilgear asked.

"This woman doesn't have the idol."

"What?!" everyone—except me and Zelgadis—cried in unison.

"Did you check *everywhere*?" Dilgear asked dubiously.

Indignant, Zelgadis replied, "Where exactly do you think she could be hiding it?"

And, uh, just so you readers don't go getting the wrong idea... It wasn't like they'd strung me up naked or anything. I was in my normal outfit—sans cape and sword, of course. And while small, the idol was definitely big enough that it would've been obvious if I were hiding it somewhere on my person.

But Dilgear remained skeptical. He circled me, inspecting me carefully.

"Hmm, you have a point... No, wait. She's a woman. She could be hiding it in her... Nah, no way. Something like *that* stuffed up *there* would tear her up inside!" he said, laughing at his own vile joke.

I could feel my face turn bright red.

"But if that man has the orichalcum statuette, I wonder why I can't track it anymore," Zelgadis mused, getting the conversation back on track.

"I didn't know which item you were after when I handed

'em over, so I cast 'Protect' on the whole lot just to be sure."

"'Protect'?"

"Yeah. It wards off search spells. You won't be able to locate the idol through the astral plane anymore."

"You can do that?" Zelgadis asked, sounding almost impressed.

"Child's play," I bragged.

Hah! In your face!

"If you're capable of something like that, then why did you limit yourself to such minor spells when we fought?"

"You weren't exactly showing your whole hand either, y'know?"

"Oh, you could tell?"

"But of course!"

"You seem a rather clever girl. That being the case, the weakness of your spells suggests..." he mused. Then, after about a minute, he clapped his hands together in realization. "Ah, it's that time of the month."

"Lay off, dammit!" I shouted, even brighter red than before.

"Don't worry. We won't kill you until that man comes for you. Zolf, do what you will with her in the meantime. Just leave her alive."

Well, that was ominous.

"By all means," Zolf chuckled in a menacing fashion.

Oh, I didn't like where this was going at all...

"Now, little miss," Zolf said in a sinister tone as he turned to me. "You've done so much for me these past few days, and now I'd like to return the favor. Any suggestions?"

Uh-oh. We got a real wannabe badass on our hands. I just can't help myself with guys like this...

"Zolf, please..." I said in a hushed voice.

"Yes?" he replied, beaming with confidence.

"Before you begin, I beg of you... Permit me to say just one thing."

"If it's pleading for me to spare you, don't bother."

"It's not that."

"All right. Out with it, then."

I stared straight into Zolf's eyes, and then said without flinching, "Hack."

The room exploded in laughter.

Hah! That one really went over, huh? I mean, I knew it was good, but I didn't expect it to slay like that... Everyone (except for Zolf, obviously) was busting a gut. Even Zelgadis turned away, hunched over, his shoulders trembling with laughter.

See? I told you I just can't help myself! Unfortunately, however, I personally wasn't in much of a position to join them in laughter. I'd figured Zolf would get angry and make a scene, but he just kept staring at me with hardened, resolute eyes.

It was kind of freaky, actually!

Once the laughter finally died down, Zolf turned and called out to the werewolf next to him in a flat, unfeeling voice.

"Dilgear."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Rape her."

"*What?!?*"

All eyes turned to the source of the cry... but it wasn't me; it was Dilgear himself. He'd objected to Zolf's command before I even had the chance.

"You're joking, right?" he squeaked at last.

"What? No... I was completely serious," Zolf replied.

"Come on, man, don't make me do this. If it were a busty goblin babe or a cyclops cutie, then maybe... But why do I have to get nasty with some squirrely human girl? I don't even think I could get it up for *that*..."

Hey!

"I guess it takes all kinds," Zelgadis shrugged. "Dilgear just isn't sexually attracted to humans."

Yeah, okay. I guess it was the same logic that would

prevent a human man from being attracted to a female goblin. Not to say some guys *aren't* into that, but still...

Still, you don't have to make it sound like goblins and cyclopes are prettier than me!

For a minute, I was actually about to make a fuss about it. Fortunately, I managed to keep my cool. I mean, it's not like I actually wanted to convince him to go through with it! I'd just have to get my revenge later.

"Fine, then. Nunsä!" Zolf shouted, now turning to the fishman—the super-creepy one. "*You* rape her!"

"Rape... her?" the fishman responded sluggishly.

"Yes!"

"You mean to... engage in... procreation... with her?"

"Er... yes, I suppose..."

It was clear Zolf didn't have high hopes for this accomplice either. But in defiance of all expectation...

"Okay... if that's what you want..."

"Hang on!"

This time, it really was me who screamed.

You've gotta be kidding! I'd rather go around making out with random people on the street than so much as *shake hands* with this piscine weirdo! And now, and now... now I had to get it on with him?! I'd rather die!

"Yes, wonderful! How very decisive! You're a true man's man, Nunsä!" Zolf cheered, regaining his excitement.

Nunsä, the fish guy, slowly approached me. Each step he took sounded like a damp rag dragging across the floor.

"No! Stay back, you creep! Stay back!"

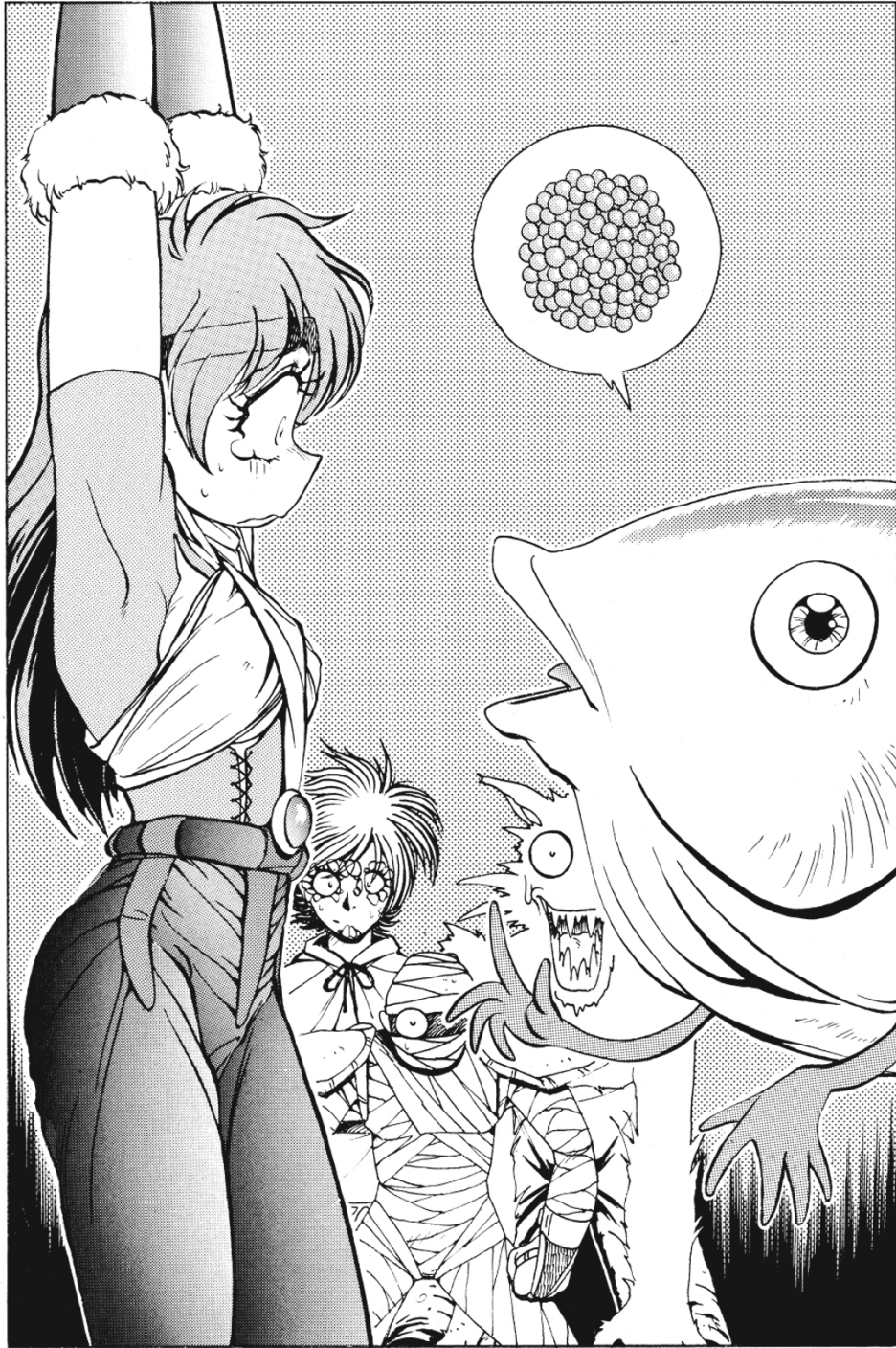
"You're so lucky..." Nunsä said in his sluggish voice. "You get to breed with me, the handsomest man in my village..."

"Handsome, my ass! Stay back! Oh, you're killing me! Don't come any closer!"

"Yes! Cry! Scream! Tremble with fear! You'll rue the day you ever defied me!" Zolf shouted triumphantly.

I really was trembling with fear at this point. Nunsä stepped closer, his face just inches from mine.

“Okay...” he said, still languid.
I was too afraid to make a sound.
“Now... lay your eggs.”



.....

Silence. Absolute silence.

Not a soul in the room had any idea what Nunsä was getting at. We all stared at him, utterly dumbfounded.

"What's wrong?" Nunsä asked.

"Hey..." said Dilgear first. "What exactly do eggs have to do with this, Nunsä?"

Nunsä looked over at the werewolf. If he were physically capable of facial expression, I believe the current look on his face would have been one of bafflement.

"Well... I can't procreate without eggs..." he said, as if this were total common sense.

"Ah!" Zelgadis exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "Fishmen reproduce differently than we do."

"What?" Zolf asked, his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Oh, of course...

"Tell us, Nunsä. How do your people have children?" Zelgadis asked.

"The female lays the eggs... and the male fertilizes them. Then you leave the eggs in a moist place... and fifty days later... hatchlings emerge..."

Yup, figures. They reproduced more like fish than men.

"What in the..." Zolf muttered before laying into Nunsä. "You could have said so earlier, you know?!"

"I didn't realize... that your breeding process was different than ours..."

"Why, you—"

"Hang on, Zolf," Dilgear interrupted. "Instead of barking at us, why don't you just man up and do it yourself? Or have Rodimus do it? You're both human, at least."

"Rodimus has his knight complex. You know, that old-fashioned nonsense about chivalry and all. He's not even here right now because we're 'bullying a child.' He'd never do it, even if I got on my hands and knees and begged."

I was guessing "Rodimus" was the middle-aged swordsman.

"As for me, I'm covered in burns—thanks to her, no less. Anything I do would be harder on me than her."

"Then... maybe just don't do it at all?"

"Wait, there's still..." Zolf murmured, now turning his gaze to Zelgadis.

"H-Hey, just a minute now," the golem man started in a panic. "Don't look at me. I'm not into sex with women who are crying and screaming."

"Aw, c'moonoon..." Zolf pleaded tearfully.

What the hell? Are you crying? What are you, a child?!

My relief at all this was quickly turning to overconfidence.

"Then you leave me no choice..." Zolf grumbled.

Ah, he was starting to bounce back.

"I'll try a different tactic."

No, no bouncing back! Stop!

"First things first..." he said, pulling out a rag about the size of a handkerchief.

"Wh-What are you gonna do?!"

Zolf ignored my question and walked around behind me.

"Don't just stand there! Tell m— Mmph!" I shouted, interrupted by a sudden gag in my mouth.

"There. Not another word out of you," he said, casually walking back around in front of me. "Now, let us proceed."

What in the world is he...?

Zolf leered at me, his lips curling up into a snide grin.

"Shrimp."

"Mmgh! [Hey!]"

"Ugly."

"Hrgh! [Damn you!]"

"Brat. Washboard. Shrew. Snot-nosed kid. Beady-eyed twit. Half-baked wannabe."

And so on and so forth. Zolf's insults kept coming fast and furious.

Argh! It was the worst! I'd never lose a trash-talking duel so long as I could, y'know, *talk!*

You think you're pretty hot, huh? You're short and

bowlegged, not to mention a total creep! I bet under all those bandages you're just as ugly as you are stupid! Where does a guy like you get off making fun of someone else's personality and looks?! Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!

"...I think you've made your point," Zelgadis finally said, though he sounded a little done with the whole thing. "But I have to say, this is all extremely childish. Shouldn't you try something a bit more... you know..."

"She called me a hack! I *will* have my revenge!" Zolf shouted.

He was clearly enraged. But me? I was livid.

"@%\$! #%#@#&! \$*&@@%!" I shouted, slamming him with the kind of profanity that most people would label "fighting words." But thanks to the gag, it all came out as, "Mmgh! Ffmgh! Rrrgh!"

"What's the matter? Don't like that, do you? Hah! Fight back if you hate it so much! Go on! Do your worst!"

Th-This little...!

"Mmm! Mmrgh! [You! You'll pay for this!]"

I swear I'll get you back one of these days!

Eventually, the day began to wane. Orange light streamed in through the small transom windows, illuminating the old statues that lined the opposite wall. As the hours crept by, that orange light faded too, giving way to an indigo darkness that cloaked both the world outside and the small room where I was being held.

My captors didn't seem to have any particular plans for me after Zolf's insult session. They'd all left the room, leaving me on my own. With no lamps around, my only source of light was the starlight through the windows. My wrists hurt. I couldn't exactly get a good night's sleep dangling from the ceiling, but the exhaustion of the day was catching up with me. By and by, I started to nod off.

I don't know how long I dozed like that, but I snapped

wide awake when I heard the door to the room creak open. Someone was coming in.

"Stay quiet," a voice whispered. It was Zelgadis.

But why did he want me to stay quiet? He appeared to be carrying something, though it was too dark for me to make out what.

I caught a glimpse, however, of a flash through the air. I yelped and hit the floor with a thud.

"Your sword and cape," Zelgadis offered.

"Huh?"

I removed the gag in my mouth and took the items in question. No doubt about it; they were mine.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"No time to explain," he said. "Do you want to get out of here or not?"

There was only one answer to *that* question. I nodded wordlessly as I slung on my sword and cape.

"Then follow me," Zelgadis whispered.

I quietly tailed him, sneaking all the while. This all seemed like pretty obvious trap material, but I couldn't puzzle out the setup. Well, wherever this was going, it had to be better than dangling from the ceiling all night.

We quickly made it outside. Moonlight beamed down upon the deep black forest and the dilapidated old church. A narrow path led from the building into the woods.

"Go," Zelgadis said.

"But..." I hesitated.

This seemed too good to be true—which meant it most definitely was. Word to the wise: "convenient" rarely goes hand-in-hand with "trustworthy."

"Circumstances have changed," he said with mild annoyance. "So just go already!"

"...Fine."

If this turned out to be a trap, I'd cross that bridge when I got there! I took off running down the road toward the forest... and came to a cold stop.

A haunting red shadow was lurking at the start of the treeline. It seemed Zelgadis had spotted the shadow too; I could hear him ruefully click his tongue behind me. Taking a closer look, I saw who it was for myself: the man who'd called himself Rezo the Red Priest.

"What are you doing, Zelgadis? Are you letting her escape?" Rezo asked. "I always knew your heart wasn't fully in the cause... but this is nothing short of insurrection."

"Shut up!" Zelgadis shouted, desperation in his voice. He was clearly afraid of Rezo. "I'm not doing this with you anymore!"

"Oh... aren't you?" Rezo said quietly.

His expression was just as inscrutable as it had been the night I met him, making it impossible to get a read on the guy.

"I fulfilled your wish and made you what you are," he said. "Yet you repay my gift of power with betrayal?"

Say what?!

"That was no gift!" Zelgadis shouted. "I know I said I wanted power... but I never asked to be turned into a chimera!"

"It was the easiest way to grant you the power you sought. But regardless of your reasons for making it, if this is your decision, then I suppose we are due a reckoning."

Zelgadis's response to that was to run over to me and grab me from behind.

"H-Hey!"

He then slowly began walking forward with me. Rezo hummed in amusement at this.

"You think you can escape using the girl as a shield? How foolish of you... Do you really think that will stop me?"

"Of course not!" Zelgadis howled, with more than a little desperation.

He was probably trying to disguise the terror he was feeling, but I still would've appreciated it if he didn't shout right in my ear...

"I know I can't get away using her as a shield. No, not as a *shield*..." he said with strange emphasis on that last part.

And right on cue, I felt my body lift off the ground. He wasn't really gonna...

"Gwah!"

No, he really *was*!

The next thing I knew, I was flying through the air. That's right. Zelgadis freaking *threw me* at Rezo! Even Rezo was surprised by this, because, I mean, who wouldn't be? He quickly stepped out of the way, leaving me sailing toward the treeline.

Yeeeeek! I flailed my arms and legs, trying to right myself in midair... but it wasn't enough.

Splat!

I hit the tree head-on, my arms and legs wrapping around it reflexively.

"Koala!" I joked nonsensically in an attempt to distract myself from the pain shooting through my entire body.

"No time for foolishness!" Zelgadis rebuffed me, immediately plucking me from the tree.

He must have been right on my heels, zooming past Rezo as soon as he threw me. He launched a Fireball behind us as he started running again, clearly trying to hold the priest at bay as we gained some distance.

"You could be a little more gentle, you know!" I shouted.

"I'll hear all your grievances once we're safe!" he shouted back.

He kept one arm firmly wrapped around me while tossing a few more Fireballs with the other. And like that, we made off into the darkness.

"I think we finally lost him..."

Dawn was starting to break by the time Zelgadis finally stopped to take a breather on the bank of a river cutting through the forest. We were some ways off the main road and there was a small waterfall nearby, so there was no need

to worry about being overheard here even if we got to talking in our normal voices.

I honestly had to admire this guy's stamina. He'd been running around all night carrying me, while all I'd done the whole time was rub my sore wrists and nose.

"My nose hurts," I whined.

"What's wrong? Syphilis?" he said casually.

"Jerk..."

I plopped down onto the ground. The rocks were nice and cool to the touch, and the idea of lying down right now was like heaven. I'd barely gotten a wink of sleep last night, and let me tell you, it was taking its toll. I'm a little more petite than most, see, and while that does make me pretty fast and agile, it also means I run out of steam faster than your typical fighter.

"Maybe we'll rest here awhile. I'm getting tired too," Zelgadis practically muttered to himself.

Score!

"...But don't even think of running away while I'm sleeping," he added.

"Wouldn't dream of it. I'm exhausted too, remember? Besides, I've only recovered a little of my magic."

"Oh?" he said, sounding impressed. "That means you've recovered *some*?"

"The point is that I'm not going anywhere. But before we hit the hay, you mind telling me what's going on here?"

Zelgadis flashed a bitter smile.

"Fair enough. You're in this pretty deep now, so I owe you an explanation. The question is where to start..."

"How about with the guy calling himself Rezo the Red Priest?"

"I see, so he's been in contact with you already..."

"Who is he, really?"

"He's who he says he is: Rezo the Red Priest, the one and only," Zelgadis answered with a shrug. "People might talk about him like he's a saint, but you caught a glimpse of who

he really is. I've been told he wasn't always like this, but I have to wonder..."

"Wait, 'who he really is'? What's this guy been up to since he left the public eye?"

"What do you think? Searching for something."

"So he's really the one trying to revive Dark Lord Shabranigdu, and not you?"

My question was met with a blank stare of confusion.

"Shabranigdu?" Zelgadis asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Huh?"

"The item he ordered us to search for... I might as well tell you. It's actually the famous Philosopher's Stone."

Whoa, really? Boy, what do you say to a thing like that?

"Y-You mean..." I stammered.

Zelgadis gave me a slight nod and said, "The Philosopher's Stone is inside of that idol."

The Philosopher's Stone... Anyone who practiced magic knew that name well. There were all kinds of theories about it. Some said that it had been produced by an ancient super-sorcerer culture, others said that it was a shard of the "Staff of the Gods" which held up our world. The only real consensus was that the stone was an amplifier of magical power—and an extremely potent one at that.

The Philosopher's Stone had only ever been seen a handful of times before. But it was so well known because, every time it did appear, it changed the course of history. Once, a mere apprentice sorcerer had used it to bring an entire kingdom to ruin. It sounded like the stuff of legends, but as far as I knew, the Philosopher's Stone was very real. Not that I'd ever expected to see it personally...

"So... what the heck does he want with it?" I dared to ask.

If Rezo was anything like the rumors said, he was already incredibly powerful. And if he wanted the Philosopher's Stone on top of that...

"Please don't tell me he's after world domination."

At that, Zelgadis shook his head and said, "No... But he did tell me once, 'All I want is to see the world.'"

"He wants... to see the world?"

"Yes. The rumors about Rezo are true: he was born blind. The only reason he learned white magic in the first place was in an attempt to open his eyes. Once he mastered the art, he traveled the world, performing miracles and saving people far and wide... but that was all just practice in service of his original goal.

"Yet even though he could restore the sight of others, for some reason, he was never able to do it for himself. He came to the conclusion that he must be lacking something, and thus began dabbling in shamanistic and black magic as well. He thought that by somehow combining them with white magic, he would be able to create even more powerful spells. And while he succeeded in achieving prodigious levels of magical growth and prowess... even then, vision still eluded him. That's when he set his eye on..."

"The fabled Philosopher's Stone?" I asked.

Zelgadis nodded.

"So why are you trying to keep him from getting it, then?" I continued. "Why is it anyone's business if he gets his sight back or not?"

"It's not about that... I'm not really trying to stop him. I'm trying to kill him. And in order to do that, I need the Philosopher's Stone. I hate to admit it, but I'm not strong enough to do the deed without it," explained Zelgadis with a stone-cold expression that lent credence to his candor.

"Is Rezo really that powerful?" I asked.

Zelgadis only answered with a silent nod. If a sorcerer of his caliber was saying that he couldn't beat Rezo, then the Red Priest must *really* be something else.

"If you want to kill the guy that badly... then is it true that he's the one who put you in that body?"

"Yes. One day, he offered me great power in exchange for helping him find the Philosopher's Stone. I agreed without

considering the implications of his offer..." Zelgadis explained, clear hatred in his voice.

"How'd you two even meet, anyway?"

I was hoping to lift the mood with that one, but Zelgadis flashed a self-reproaching smile and took a few moments before answering.

"I've known him my whole life. He must be my grandfather or my great-grandfather, I think... I don't know for certain, and I don't really care to."

"What?!"

"Despite his appearance, I believe he's at least a hundred years old. But the point is that I have the blood of the great pretender-to-sainthood, Rezo, running through my veins."

"Sorry I asked..."

Oof, so awkward... I scratched the tip of my nose with my finger.

"It's all right," he said, drifting into melancholy.

Good grief... This was way too depressing to deal with right now.

"Well, uh, I guess that brings me up to speed... So let's get some rest, okay?" I said, forcing a cheerful tone and collapsing on the ground (which felt amazing, by the way). "You wanna sleep too? You're tired, aren't you?"

"I am... but we could still be ambushed. I'll stand watch for now. I'll wake you in a bit, and we can trade places."

"Perfect. Nighty-night, then," I said as I closed my eyes. I was fast asleep in no time.

When I opened my eyes next, I could tell not much time had passed based on the angle of the sun and my body's angry protests vis-a-vis the concept of being awake again... But what had woken me up was a palpable hostility, and from multiple sources, no less. I was capable of singling out—through instinct alone, not magic—up to ten hostiles around me. And because I couldn't get a proper headcount right now, I knew it had to be more than that.

"We're surrounded," Zelgadis said casually.

He wasn't trying to keep his voice down. The enemy clearly knew where we were, so trying to be stealthy now was pointless.

"How many?" I asked.

"Twenty or thirty trolls, I think. Rezo doesn't seem to be with them, so we can probably handle them ourselves."

He sounded pretty chill about the whole thing, though I had my doubts as to whether or not his cool confidence was justified...

"Come on out. I'm sure you know we've spotted you. Let's finish this already, Boss Zel," called a familiar voice.

I stood up on the spot and could see Zelgadis had been right on the mark. There were trolls flitting about among the trees.

I raised my voice to respond, "Hello there, Master Dilgear. Out on long patrol, huh? Tough work."

When he heard me call out to him, the werewolf stepped out from behind a tree. He was closer than I'd imagined.

"You remember my name? I'm flattered."

"How could I forget?" I replied, fixing a glare on Dilgear. "You said all that stuff about me. You know, about how I was less sexy than a goblin, and how you'd rather kiss a cyclops, and how I've got rougher skin than a rock golem, and how I'm shorter than a pixie..."

"...I don't remember saying all that."

"The point is, Zelgadis here is gonna avenge my honor! Now go, Zelgadis! The world is waiting for you! Go, great hero! Go!"

"Is there anything to be done about that personality of yours?" Zelgadis said with a sidelong glance at me.

"Not a thing," I responded.

It's not like I do this for my own gratification. I only act the way I do to get enemies' guard down. (Honest! Really!)

"Didn't you swear loyalty to me, Dilgear?" Zelgadis asked with pointed ferocity.

But the werewolf just snorted in response, "I didn't swear loyalty to you, Zelgadis. I swore loyalty to the Red Priest's mad swordsman. You betrayed Lord Rezo, so now we're enemies!"

"Hmm..." Zelgadis's eyes narrowed into slits. He looked every bit the spellsword he was. "You think a pathetic werewolf like you can beat me?"

"I'm pathetic, am I? Maybe I'll show you what a werewolf can really do. Get him!" Dilgear howled.

The swarm of armed trolls was on us in an instant. How dumb can you be?

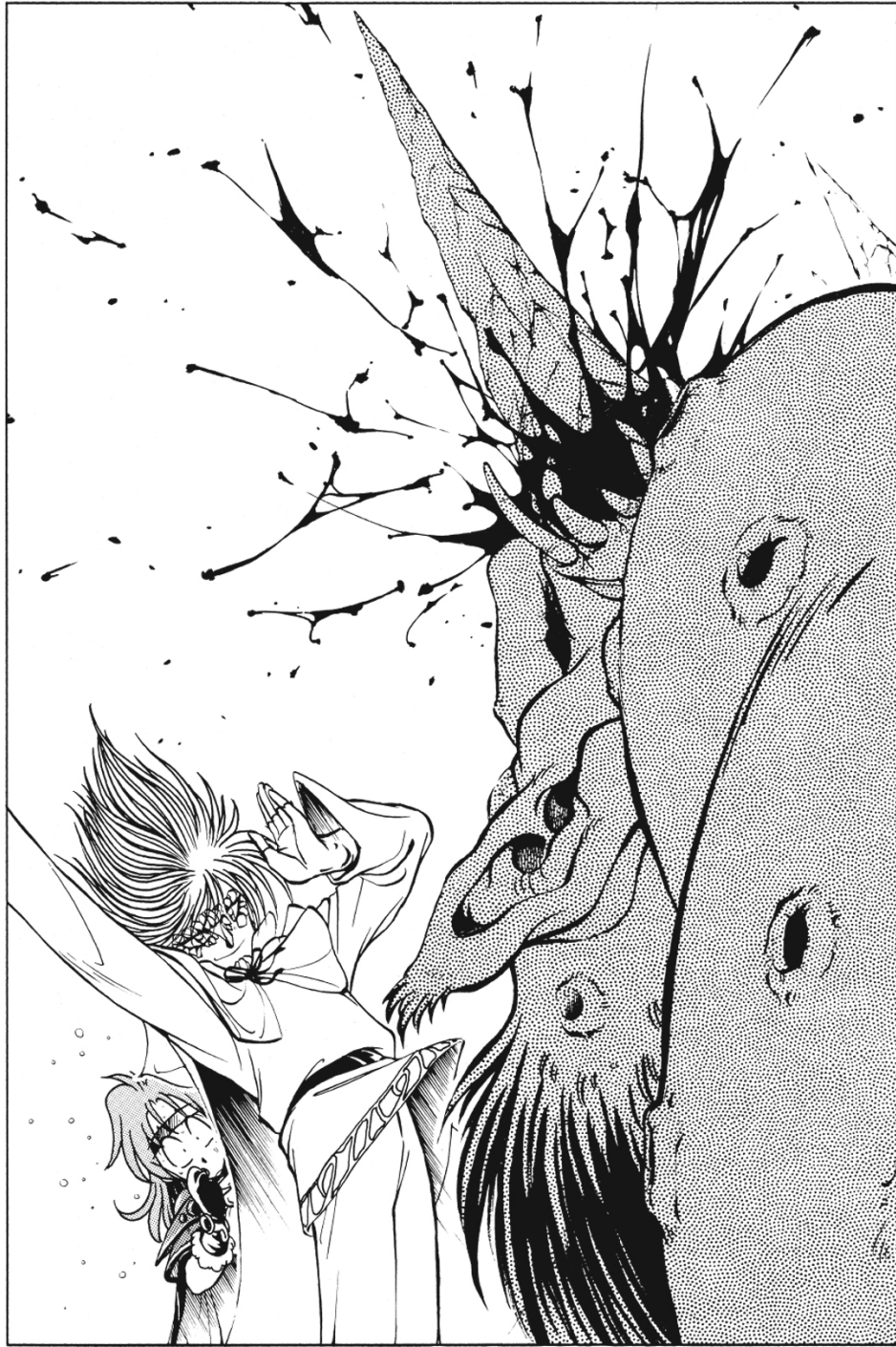
With a small smirk on his face, Zelgadis raised his right hand high. Then, as if grasping something invisible in his palm, he slammed it down into the ground below.

"Dug Haute!"

Whoa! I quickly jumped behind Zelgadis. The earth rumbled at first, then began to ripple like water. It then surged and broke into waves, sending the trolls into a panic.

"Hah!" With a smile that did indeed make him look a little mad, Zelgadis held his right hand aloft again. "Earth below, serve my will!"

The ground beneath him answered Zelgadis's call. The earth roiled and raged, then suddenly burst upward in countless spikes that skewered the lot of trolls!



Just like that, the battle was over.

The stone spikes had piked the trolls, hoisting them into the air. Many were still breathing, but even with their regenerative powers, their wounds couldn't close in this state. The life slowly drained from them until, at last, they were all dead.

It was a torturous way to go. I thought about saying something, but held back. I didn't really have a leg to stand on after my reverse-recovery spell stunt just a few days ago.

"Now," Zelgadis said with an icy smile. "You were going to show me what you could do, weren't you? Or did you just lose your nerve?"

"Tsk..." Dilgear stepped out from behind one of the stone spikes. "I get why they call you Rezo's mad swordsman... As long as you have that shamanistic magic, there's no way I can beat you."

"Oh?" Zelgadis said mockingly. "You make it sound as though you *could* beat me if it came down to pure swordsmanship."

"I would say that I could, yeah," Dilgear smirked.

"Then let's put that to the test," Zelgadis returned, drawing his sword smoothly.

"You'll just use your magic if I start to win," Dilgear replied without returning the gesture.

"I won't."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's your funeral..."

The werewolf at last drew his sword in one clean stroke. It looked like an especially long scimitar that shone with a sinister glint when he held it up in the midday sun.

I knew I was going to get caught up in the fray if I just stood there gawking, so I drew back a few paces to give the boys their space.

"Graaawr!"

Dilgear unleashed a bestial cry and dashed at Zelgadis,

who leaped at him in turn. They met head-on, sparks flying from their clashing swords.

Zelgadis pushed back against the werewolf's blow and laughed, "Hah! What's wrong, Dilgear? I thought you could beat me in a swordfight."

"I'm just getting started, Boss Zel!"

Dilgear gave his scimitar a light twist to divert the force behind Zelgadis's broadsword. Then, estimating just where the sword would fly, he slipped to the side and swung his scimitar through the air at chest-level. Zelgadis dodged the sweeping blow by a hair.

"Not bad at all."

"I'm flattered."

I estimated they were about equal in terms of skill, but Dilgear didn't seem nearly as confident as Zelgadis. I bet he really was planning to fall back on his magic if he had to.

But hey, I'm not taking sides here! After all, both Rezo and Zelgadis saw me as nothing but a tool to help them get their hands on the Philosopher's Stone, so it didn't much matter to me whose hostage I ended up being.

The two fighters slowly approached each other. I thought about taking the opportunity to run, but if Zelgadis caught me making a break for it, I'd be in for a volley of magic for my troubles.

"Hyah!" Dilgear roared as he made his move.

He leaped to the side, ran up to one of the stone spikes left from Zelgadis's Dug Haute, and swung hard at it with his scimitar. It was an unstable magical structure, so it easily shattered under his blade, sending rubble flying at Zelgadis.

"Wah!" I let out a yelp and reeled back as Dilgear smashed a second, then a third spike.

It quickly cloaked the area in a cloud of dust and debris that swallowed Zelgadis, obscuring him from view. Dilgear, however, fiercely charged right into the cloud.

Meanwhile, I was hacking and coughing. I'd just been a bystander up until this point, but now I was personally

contending with a lungful of dust cloud. I held my breath, yanked a handkerchief out of my pocket, and used it to cover my nose and mouth. Ah, my eyes were stinging...

While I was busy with that, the two combatants flew out of the cloud. The dust was settling quickly; it didn't seem Dilgear's big diversion had panned out in his favor. Despite his decisiveness and flare for the dramatic, he didn't really think his actions through very well... You see a lot of folks like that in life, I guess.

"That was a pointless little trick," Zelgadis said in a mocking voice. "How can one man run his mouth so much with so little to show for it? It's almost impressive."

"Shut up!" Dilgear cried, charging in again.

"Heh," Zelgadis chuckled.

Although... it looked like he lost his footing for a moment as he laughed. In the blink of an eye, Dilgear closed in on him. They crossed paths, Zelgadis's sword catching Dilgear's shoulder in the process.

I could tell what had happened. When it looked like Zelgadis had lost his balance, he was really using his feet—which were still obscured by the remnants of the dust cloud—to kick a rock or something right at Dilgear. It didn't do much to hurt him, but it had succeeded in throwing him off track.

"Well? I'm still waiting for my funeral," Zelgadis said sarcastically to the werewolf, who was now bleeding from the shoulder.

"Just be patient," Dilgear laughed.

My eyes went wide. Zelgadis's did too as we stood there and watched the werewolf's wound begin to close. In a matter of seconds, the gaping slash had completely healed as if it were never there.

"Did you forget I was half-troll? If you want to beat me with the sword—and you said you would—you'll have to cut off my head in one swipe! I wonder if you can..."

Of course! If this guy had a troll's regenerative powers,

then beheading him was about the only way to beat him with a sword alone. Zelgadis, however, showed no sign of panic.

"Indeed, I had forgotten about that," he said, readying his sword again to go on the offensive. "Grah!"

He raised his broadsword aloft to bring it down on Dilgear's head—not good! He'd left his midsection wide open, and Dilgear didn't miss his chance to lunge at it!

"Hngh!"

Dilgear's scimitar slashed Zelgadis's stomach. I expected a spray of blood...

But all that came was a hard clinking sound.

"You also seem to have forgotten... I'm part rock golem," Zelgadis revealed, standing tall with a calm smile. "If you want to best me with a blade, it would have to be the Sword of Light. Which means you can never defeat me, no matter how hard you try."

A look of despair befell Dilgear.

"So do you wish to meet your doom here, or will you go crying back to Rezo? Which will it be?"

"Tch!"

Dilgear turned to retreat, but threw something like a pebble from his pocket as he did. Zelgadis only had to take a step to the side to dodge it, and whatever it was splashed uselessly into the river behind him.

"I'll get you yet!" Dilgear shouted (oof, mega-cliche!) as he disappeared into the forest.

Zelgadis just watched him go, making no attempt to pursue him.

"Pathetic," he said, brushing a hand through his slightly ruffled hair.

"Wow, Master Zelgadis! You're so strong! That was magnificent!" I proclaimed, greeting the victor with a round of applause.

Zelgadis took it about as well as you'd expect.

"Could you stop?" he said plainly.

"But I'm congratulating you!"

"Uh-huh."

He decided to give up on the verbal spar, and walked swiftly past me on his way to the river.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To get some water," he replied brusquely.

"Good idea. I'd better wash up, too..."

I jogged after Zelgadis. The spell he'd used earlier messed up the ground enough that traversing it was a dicey affair, but I eventually made it to the riverbed, took off my gloves, and filled my hands with cold water.

Man, that sure feels nice! Huh? Wait a minute...

"Don't drink it! It's poisoned!" I cried.

Apparently surprised by my sudden declaration, Zelgadis promptly spat out what was in his mouth.

"What did you just say?"

"The water's poisoned! Poisoned, I tell you! Look!" I said, pointing upstream.

There were a few fish drifting our way... but they were floating, not swimming.

"Who could have done this?" Zelgadis muttered pensively.

"Dilgear, I assume. That pebble-looking thing he threw earlier must have been a vial of poison or something. He probably knew you'd go to get a drink after the fight."

"Aha," Zelgadis hummed, sounding oddly appreciative. "Dilgear's smarter than I gave him credit for."

"Oh sure, he's brilliant!" I said sarcastically. "But anyway, now Rezo and his goons know where we are. Any idea where we should head next?"

"No," he said simply.

"Oh, you're hopeless! Okay, fine. Follow me, then," I said, getting a move on.

My destination was Atlas City. I figured if I could reunite with Gourry there, maybe we could start to turn things around.

But, man, I gotta say... We started out speculating about a mysterious treasure and then dove right into a potential “prevent the Dark Lord’s revival” plot. Yet now that the truth’s come to light, this is really just about some guy who wants to see and another who wants revenge?

Feels kind of anticlimactic, you know?

Rezo’s goons ramped up their attacks after our encounter with Dilgear. Zelgadis and I were attacked twice before noon, again during lunch, twice more in the afternoon, then once again over dinner.

And after we went to bed that night? You guessed it: more goons! Gimme a break already!

I had to wonder where the hell all these guys were even coming from. They were like the heads of a hydra—cut down one, more show up in its place. It was a real rogues’ gallery, too: trolls, goblins, cyclopes, berserkers, ogres, and so on. They seemed less like raid parties and more like a parade. A real who’s who of bad guy goonery.

Anyway, that brings us to today. As you’re probably expecting, we’ve got more guys after us. This particular group was led once again by our dear friend Dilgear the werewolf. There were a few new faces too, though: an old guy who looked like a sorcerer, a war mantis, and a dullahan. The rest of their ranks were padded out with ogres, berserkers, and the like—about fifty guys all told.

“Quite an impressive welcome party,” Zelgadis said, though without his usual confidence. He must have actually been impressed by the lineup.

“Hey there, Boss Zel,” Dilgear called as he took a step forward. “You sure gave my pride a licking last time. I’m here for some payback.”

Okay, now I’ve got this guy pegged. He’s the type who only acts tough when he’s got a crew to back him up. It *really* made me want to greet him by way of a Fireball.

“You’ve certainly proved your strength, but do you really

think you can beat all of us by yourself?" Dilgear taunted.

"Hang on just a minute," I interjected and took a step forward. "Aren't you forgetting someone?"

"Who?" he asked, looking confused.

Why, this little...!

"Me, of course! Me!"

"And what are *you* gonna do?"

Okay, so I do *not* like being trivialized. I was gonna have to make a statement here!

"Hey, don't play all your cards just yet," Zelgadis said, stopping me just before I was about to cut loose. He must have read my mind.

"Why not?" I asked.

"If you exhaust your power here, then when the next band shows up—which might include Rezo himself—we'll be sitting ducks."

"Okay, fair point."

That meant I'd have to stick to the petty and mundane. Ah, cruel disappointment! But a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

As I drew my sword, however, something suddenly occurred to me.

"Say... how do they keep finding us, anyway?" I asked.

We were heading in the general direction of Atlas City, but we'd changed course a few times to try to throw off our pursuers. Yet somehow, they'd managed to pinpoint our location every time.

"Oh, that's because I'm here," Zelgadis said as though it were obvious.

"Huh?" I glanced over at him.

"I told you. My body is a composite made from Rezo's magic."

Oh, duh. In other words, Zelgadis himself was a magical marker. I knew spells to throw off magical tracking, but I had to understand the magic at play to make them work. That meant, in order to hide Zelgadis from Rezo, I'd need the

nitty-gritty on how he'd been fused... But the spell Rezo had used was almost certainly one of his own invention, and that would take time to unravel even for a beautiful genius like me.

"This basically means we have to take out the Red Priest at some point, doesn't it?"

"It does."

Hoo boy. Maybe I shouldn't have teamed up with this guy after all. Nah, this was still better than dangling from the ceiling of a church... erm, wasn't it?

Whatever! Kicking myself wasn't gonna get me anywhere right now. It was time to get to work!

I recited a hushed incantation under my breath and then shouted, "Fireball!"



The spell I unleashed signaled the start of the battle. I'd done it without the usual hands-in-front-of-my-chest ritual, which meant it was weaker than normal—but with the element of surprise on my side, I caught quite a few ogres unaware.

After that, the enemies rushed us.

“Dig Volt!”

I hit the oncoming crowd with another attack spell. My target was the old sorcerer leading the pack. I know, I know! People always say to respect your elders, but I say you get to make exceptions when they're trying to kill you! Besides, I was sure this guy would be loads of trouble later if I didn't take him out first.

Unfortunately, the old man easily dodged my spell with greater speed than I'd anticipated. I ended up taking out the berserker behind him instead, although I figured that should be sufficiently attention-grabbing too. Sure enough, the old sorcerer looked my way and changed course.

He was a bald old guy dressed in a green robe. His face below the nose was hidden behind a white beard, but his eyes were a pale color with no pupils, which was honestly a little creepy.

Bah, no time for heebie-jeebies! Here I come!

“Flare Arrow!” At my summons, a dozen arrows of flame appeared before me. “Go!”

My fiery arrows homed in on the sorcerer from the front, from the sides, and from above. I thought there was no way he could escape, but...

He was just too darn fast!

“Khah!” he shouted with an exhale of internal energy that sent the arrows ahead of him scattering!

How the heck did he do that?! The rest of the arrows meant to pin him down just tore through empty air, and he closed the distance to me in a second.

If you're wondering about the other baddies, they were pretty much all going after Zelgadis. He was kinda in a bad

way, actually... but so was I! This old guy was something else! Never underestimate the elderly!

"Hrk!"

At some point, he must have chanted a spell. A whip made of fire suddenly appeared in his hand. I cast the freeze spell I'd been preparing for my next attack on my sword, which I then used to cut the whip in half.

We both stopped, sizing each other up from some distance away.

"You're a spirited little wench to take on the great Zolom," the old man proclaimed, his whiskers eerily still as he spoke.

"And you're a suicidal old man to challenge the great Lina," I shot back at him.

Zolom let out a hearty chuckle. I leaped back, holding my palms in front of my chest as I began reciting another spell.

"A Fireball, eh? That won't help you!" Zolom declared, charging me.

"See if you still think so," I said, cradling the small ball of light I'd produced against my body before throwing it, "after I use it!"

"Hwagh!" He effortlessly dodged the ball of light, flitting like a bird through the air. "I told you it wouldn't help you!"

As I've explained before, Fireballs only explode when they hit something. If they miss their target, they don't do squat. But in this instance...

Fwip!

I raised my right thumb and pointed it at my chest. I couldn't help grinning a little. Zolom had just touched lightly down on the ground, when...

"Hrm?"

My Fireball struck him right in the back!

"Gwah!"

And exploded on impact!

"I never said it was an ordinary Fireball!" I crowed, throwing my taunts at the inferno that quickly rose to surround him.

In my time studying magic, I'd worked out a few fun variations of particular spells. This was one of them.

"Let this be a lesson to you: never let your guard down. Now, maybe I'll go help Zelgadis—"

I made a flourish with my cape and was about to run into the fray, when all of a sudden I felt a chill run down my spine. I reflexively dove to the left, but I was a split second too slow.

"Urgh!"

Pain shot up my right arm. There were a number of silver needles sticking out of it. I turned back quickly to see Zolom standing there triumphantly.

"'Rumors of my death' and all that. Never let your guard down, little miss," he said with a hint of mockery. (Actually, it was more than just a hint.) "You're a fine practitioner... but shamanistic magic with a physical intermediary will never work on me."

What?!

His words took my breath away. If shamanistic magic didn't work on him, then... did that mean this slightly odd-looking old man was a pure demon?! If so, then of course fire spells would never work.

Dammit. It burned me to admit it, but I *had* let my guard down. I'd totally misread this guy. And thanks to that, my right hand was basically paralyzed.

"Now, allow me to take the lead this time."

Whips of flame lashed out from both of his hands. He aimed for my head with the one in his left and my legs with the one in his right.

"Oh, please!"

I used my cold-enchanted sword, which I'd swapped to my left hand, to sweep away the whip coming for my head as I hopped over the one coming for my legs like a jump rope. This is the part where I admit I was once known by the embarrassing nickname "Jump-Roper Lina."

But just as my feet left the ground...

Zolom's forehead opened up. Countless silver streaks raced out of the opening, zooming right for me. I didn't have any time to dodge!

Shink!

Huh...?

The silver needles dropped to the ground with a metallic sound. Someone had come to my rescue, and there was only one person I knew who had this kind of "legendary hero" timing...

"Hello there! We meet again, little miss."

I knew that tone! That wink!

"Gourry!" I couldn't help but cry out his name.

4: Finally! A Chance to Show My Stuff!

“Oh? Is this another member of your gang?” Zolom asked.

“I’m not part of any gang,” Gourry replied with a shake of his head. “I’m just this girl’s guardian.”

“Hmm... But that still makes you my enemy, doesn’t it?”

“It does seem that way, sir.”

“Then I’ll just kill you first.”

“You’re welcome to try!” Gourry declared, breaking into a run.

“Hyah!” Zolom cried, letting fly his flame whip and his silver needles simultaneously.

Gourry dodged them without breaking a sweat and closed the distance between him and the old sorcerer in a second. Then there was a flash of his sword. It was all happening so fast, I couldn’t even follow it. I hadn’t had a chance to really sit back and watch Gourry at work before, so this was my first time realizing how good he truly was. I mean, I’m no slouch with a blade myself, but Gourry was on a whole other level!

Zolom’s head opened up again, sending more silver streaks flying at Gourry from behind, but...

“Hah!”

He knocked them all away again with ease.

“Hmm... Not bad for a young’un,” Zolom said jovially.

“Huh... I didn’t realize you were a demon,” Gourry remarked, equally unfazed.

Oh, c’mon, man! Get with the program already! Sheesh...

“Then you must now see, sirrah, that you cannot cut me down with swords such as yours.”

He was right. Half-demon creatures like lesser and brass demons were one thing, but pure demons like this guy were denizens of the astral plane—in other words, they couldn't be destroyed by physical means here on the material side of reality. A decent magic sword packed with exorcism amulets might be able to hurt Zolom, but while Gourry's sword was pretty nice, it wasn't at all magical. Meanwhile, mine was fashioned with an amulet, but it wasn't powerful enough to hurt Zolom.

Oh well. Guess I'd just have to get serious and—

"I *can* cut you down, though," Gourry said casually.

How stupid is this guy?!

"Ohh?" Zolom hummed, his voice brimming with mockery.

"Go ahead and try it if you think you can."

"If you wish..."

I couldn't even begin to imagine what was going through Gourry's mind as he sheathed his sword and instead plucked a pin out of his pocket.

"Don't tell me you think you can defeat me with that little thing."

"Oh, of course not." Smiling amiably, Gourry put his left hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword. "I said I'd *cut* you down, not *poke* you down, remember?"

"Wordplay, hmm? Just what do you think you're going to do with that, then?"

"This."

There, Gourry inserted the pin in his right hand into the hilt of the sword he was holding with his left.

Hrm?

It apparently released the mechanism that held the blade in place. In other words, Gourry was separating it from the hilt... But why?

"Caught on yet?" he asked, slipping the pin back into his pocket.

Of course not, dummy! None of this makes any sense! I shouted internally.

Yet Gourry remained perfectly calm, either out of confidence or pure obliviousness. I wasn't sure which.

"I can't say I follow at all, young'un, but—"

"Then... how about now?!" Gourry cried, grasping the hilt in his right hand and charging!

The idiot!

"I've certainly caught on to what a foolish man you are!" Zolom bellowed, conjuring a dozen Flare Arrows and firing them at Gourry all at once.

"Hah!" Gourry scoffed.

Incredibly, he dodged every single arrow! But dodging alone wasn't going to win this fight...

In the blink of an eye, Gourry had closed in on Zolom. He held his sword aloft and roared, "Light, come forth!"

My eyes went wide. Zolom froze up in shock. Before he could even try to move again, he was cleaved in two. He didn't even have time to scream.

With that, Zolom was indeed cut down by Gourry's sword. In place of the metal blade he'd removed before gleamed a blade of pure light.

"The Sword... of Light..."

There was no mistaking it. The thing I was looking at—the artifact shining in Gourry's right hand—was without question the legendary Sword of Light. The blade effectively served as its sheath; removing it allowed Gourry to unleash its true power, which he'd just demonstrated to great effect. Zolom's lifeless body now crumbled into dust.

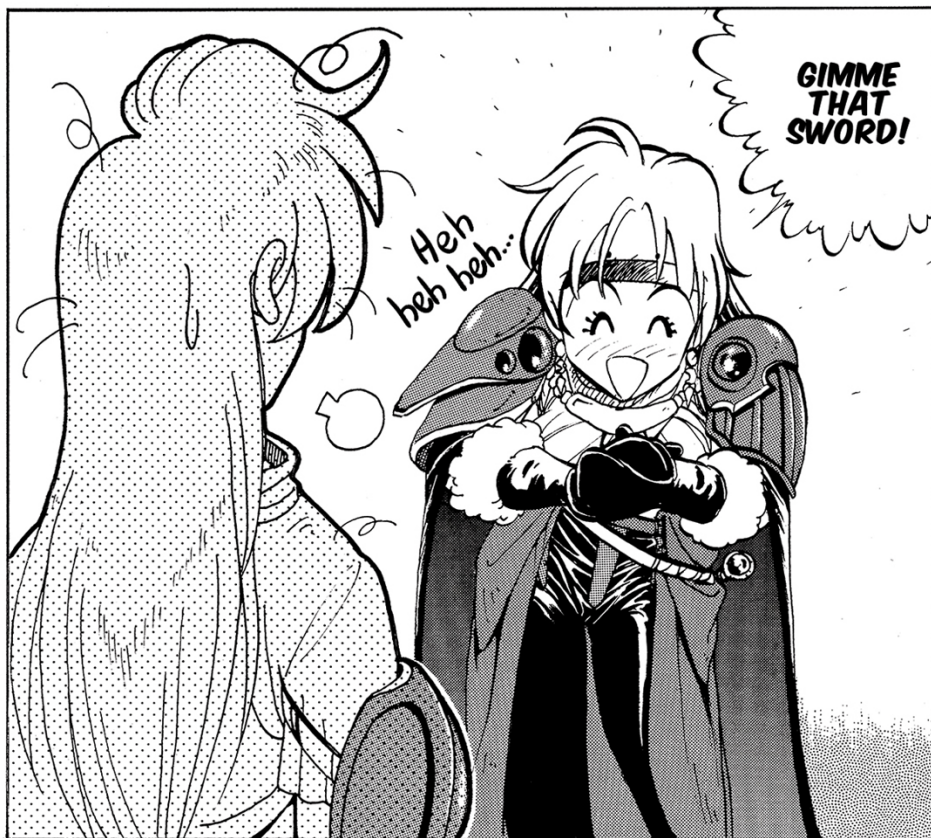
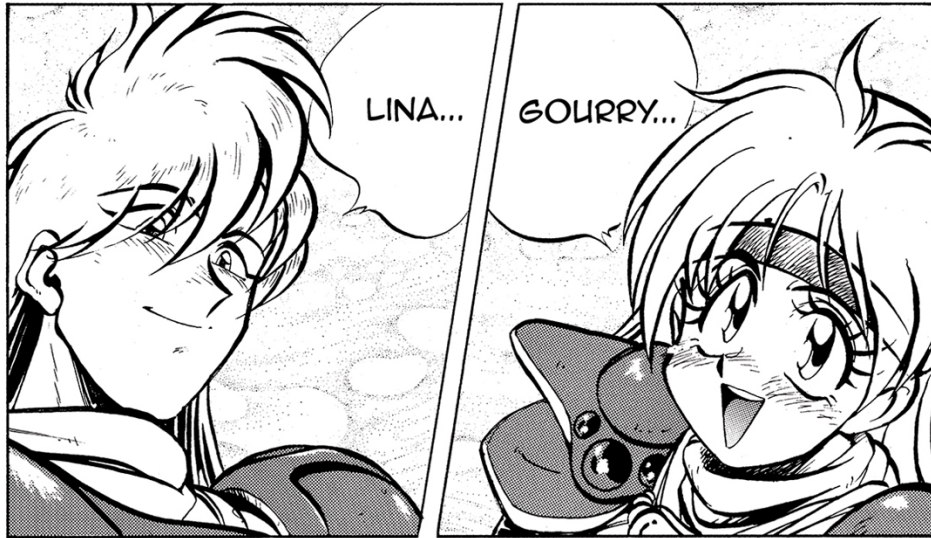
"G-Gourry..." I managed to say at last, my voice soft and hoarse.

"Hey there," he replied, looking over at me with a big, bright smile. "Seems we meet again. How have you been, little miss?"

"Gourry!"

I took off, sprinting toward Gourry with all my heart. He slowly returned the Sword of Light to its "sheath" and stood there silently, waiting for me. I ran right up to him, gazing

up at that old, familiar face.



Splat! Gourry faceplanted spectacularly.

Oh, spare me the theatrics!

"Please, please! Gimme it! Pretty please!"

"Wow, um..." Gourry got back on his feet, rubbing at his head. "For a moment there, I thought you were happy to see *me* or something..."

"Happy reunions later! Sword-giving now! Look, it's not like I'm asking for it for free! Five hundred! I'll pay you five hundred for it!"

"Excuse me?!" Gourry nearly shouted. "Five hundred? You couldn't even buy a rapier for that!"

"Fine, five fifty! I'm diggin' deep here! Just take my money already, you swindler!"

"You're the swindler here! For pity's sake, in what universe would *anyone* sell the Sword of Light for that paltry price?"

"This one! Probably!"

"Enough!"

Sheesh, what a miser! Doesn't he understand that parting with even a single copper coin is like torture for me? I mean, hello? Daughter of merchants here!

"First of all, this sword is an heirloom. It's been passed down in my family for generations. I'll never sell it, no matter how much you offer me!"

"Just give it to me, then! I'll make it *my* family heirloom, and pass it down in *my* family for generations! That's cool, right? Right?!"

"Y-You idiot! Why would I *ever* agree to that? The sword is mine, and that's final!"

"You monster! What a way to treat a lady! I could just cry! Bloo-hoo-hoo!"

"I'm not listening!"

"...Okay, enough joking around."

Gourry, caught off guard by my sudden one-eighty back into serious business mode, took another faceplant.

"What... What is *wrong* with you?!"

“Just hear me out. I don’t have time to explain everything, but the guy who saved me from those jerks is in trouble right now. So, seeing as I kind of owe him one, maybe we could work together and do him a solid?”

“Well, if you insist.”

“Great! Glad we’re on the same page! Now follow me!” I proclaimed as I dashed off.

Time to save Zelgadis!

I figured even a tough guy like Zelgadis would be in for a struggle up against so many enemies, and as it turns out, I was right on the money. I had to give him props for having already finished off most of the ogre and berserker cannon fodder, but the real big bads—Dilgear, the war mantis, and the dullahan—were still in fighting form.

When we rolled up, Gourry made a beeline for the nearby dullahan and sliced through it with the Sword of Light before anyone could get a word in edgewise.

“Hey-ho! Cavalry’s here!” I called.

“Yeah!” Gourry echoed.

Our entrance surprised all present and turned the tide of battle on a dime. Rezo’s flunkies were driven back as the three of us chipped away at the remaining ogres and berserkers.

“Rgh!” Dilgear growled resentfully.

And it was right about then...

“Oh?”

Zelgadis noticed first. His puzzled reaction had all three of us stopped in place.

“Huh?” Dilgear turned back, his rueful expression melting into one of joy. “Rodimus!”

Yup. Entering the scene now was the middle-aged fighter Rodimus, halberd in hand. He was accompanied by a guy I’d never seen before who, if I may say, was one fine silver fox!



Ack, wait! This is no place to be sticking hearts into the

script!

"I can't believe you came, Rodimus! I could really use the help!"

"Now we'll be evenly matched," the war mantis declared.

But just then, before Dilgear could even react, Rodimus strode up and socked him in the face! The blow sent the werewolf flying. He slammed into a nearby tree with a thunderous crash... and then fell to the ground, totally still.

"R-Rodimus! What are you doing?!" the war mantis howled. "Have you lost your mind?!"

"Far from it!" Rodimus answered, approaching us slowly. "I swore fealty to Sir Zelgadis—an oath which does not carry over to this so-called Red Priest!"

"H-How dare you?!"

Enraged, the war mantis charged forward. But he didn't stand a chance against Rodimus's halberd.

"Graaahh!" Rodimus howled, and it was over.

He'd cleanly cut the war mantis in two at the waist. Its lower half kept running until it smashed into a tree. Meanwhile, its upper half toppled to the ground and, after a lot of dramatic spasming, eventually fell still. After that, the rest of the cannon fodder scattered like flies.

"...Thanks for the help," Zelgadis said.

"I still don't know what's going on... I guess it doesn't really matter," Gourry said with a vague laugh before turning to the middle-aged knight and his foxy companion. "But are you guys sure about this?"

"It's nothing, really," said the senior dreamboat.

Wait, that voice... I knew that voice...

"Thanks, Rodimus, Zolf," said Zelgadis. "I wish I didn't have to drag you guys into this nonsense."

Z-Z-Zolf?! Wait just a minute! You're telling me that, under the wrappings, Mr. Mummy Man was secretly a middle-aged hunk?! No way! I never would've dreamed he was so good-looking...

"Oh... little miss. You're not dead yet?" he said, casting a

glance my way.

Grr... I was considering forgiving him since he was so easy on the eyes and all, but that little dig convinced me that holding grudges was the way to go. Still, if we were going up against the same enemy, there was no point in bickering with him now.

"For the sake of our temporary alliance, I'm willing to put the past behind us," I said. (Quite nobly, I might add.) "Even if you're a constant burden, even if you're a hack sorcerer, even if you're a creepy sadist... An ally is an ally. Even dead trees enhance the mountain scenery in their own way. We'll pick up the copious slack you'll no doubt be leaving at all turns, so consider all bygones water under the bridge."

"...You're still holding a grudge."

"Perish the thought! I mean, *of course* you would think that, but you mustn't go projecting your own raging jealousy, seething inferiority complex, and warped sense of pride onto *me*."

"You little brat..."

"Hold it, Lina," Gourry interrupted. "Could you at least back off long enough to tell me what's going on? I'm still in the dust over here."

Oh, right. I still hadn't explained all this to Gourry. And so I began filling him in on everything he'd missed.

"...And that's that. You with the program now?"

I wrapped up storytime right around the time the sun began to set behind me.

"You with me?" I prompted again.

Gourry didn't respond. He just sat there staring at me—no, past me—glassy-eyed. Everyone else had long settled down on the ground too; the battle this afternoon must've taken its toll on them. That said, I'm a woman and I felt fine, so I guess they were really just wusses or something.

"I must say..." Rodimus began, his tone weary. "You do seem to enjoy the sound of your own voice."

"Do I?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Do I really?

"Anyhoo... You get the picture now, right?"

"I could've done without the internal monologues and dramatic descriptions, but other than that, I think I get the gist of things," Gourry acknowledged, picking himself up.

"This brings us to the real question," Zelgadis cut in, rising to his feet as well. "Are you giving me the Philosopher's Stone or not?"

"Nope," I said casually.

"I thought not," Zelgadis replied. I could feel the hostility begin to radiate off him.

"He wants to restore his sight. You want revenge. It's all a little petty for the Philosopher's Stone, don't you think?"

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"No, no, no! No insult intended. I'm just not giving you the Philosopher's Stone; that's all. Besides, it's entirely possible this whole thing is some ruse you cooked up with Rezo, you know?"

"I had a feeling you'd say that," Zelgadis said, drawing his sword smoothly. "So this is how it ends after all..."

"I guess so..." Gourry replied, putting his hand on his sword as well.

Meanwhile, Zolf and Rodimus rushed to Zelgadis's side.

"Stand down, you two," he said.

Rodimus smiled grimly and took a step back.

"B-But..." Zolf argued.

"Stand down," Zelgadis repeated, with Zolf sliding back sulkily.

"Oh, come on! This is ridiculous!" I shouted.

I was trying to cut in, but neither Gourry nor Zelgadis dignified me with so much as a glance. This was getting pretty serious. Even Zolf and Rodimus were watching intently to see how it would all unfold.

Zelgadis and Gourry approached each other, slowly but

steadily.

I shouted even louder this time, "I said that's enough already! Yes, we all know this would be a stupid awesome duel, but priorities, people!"

"Indeed. You should listen to the girl," came a new voice.

I gasped when I heard it. It came from right behind me—no, it was right in my ear.

Chkk. A cold sensation ran through the back of my neck. My instincts told me that I was dead meat if I moved. All eyes (except mine, of course) turned to see who was standing behind me.

But I already knew who it was. I recognized his voice. He was the one man who could inspire such fear, even in Zelgadis...

"Rezo..." Gourry said first, daring to speak his name.

"It has been quite some time, hasn't it?" Rezo replied. "Although, I was hoping we could skip the formalities. I believe you know what I'm here for, ah... Gourry, was it?"

"The Philosopher's Stone, right?"

"Indeed. Oh, and I'd advise against attempts at subterfuge. This needle is deep in her neck. One small push and I'll have blood on my hands."

Urk! The gravity of the situation reflexively made me gulp. Sweat began to pour from my forehead.

"He's bluffing! Don't give it to him!" Zelgadis cried in a voice close to a scream.

Obviously, no one was buying that. It was clear Zelgadis's only priority was making sure Rezo didn't get the stone; he knew better than any of us that Rezo wasn't bluffing. The sweat dripped down my cheeks and fell from my chin.

"Why do you want it?" Gourry asked.

"What she told you earlier was correct. I want to be able to see; that is all."

"Why... do you want it *this badly*?" I asked, my voice trembling with fear.

"I needn't explain myself to you. As one blessed with

sight, you would never understand.”

Is that how it works, huh?

“Now, the stone, if you please.”

“All right.”

“No, don’t do it! Don’t give it to him!”

Ignoring Zelgadis’s protests, Gourry produced the orichalcum idol and tossed it to Rezo underhand.

“Here.”

Rezo reached out with his free hand and caught it firmly.

“I have it... It’s mine!” he exclaimed, his tone changing completely. There was a sort of demonic glee in his words.

“Now let Lina go!”

“Oh, calm down. I’ll free her soon enough...”

Puff! The orichalcum idol disintegrated in Rezo’s hand. That magic-sealing metal, pulverized so easily... From within it appeared a small, black rock. To anyone—amateurs and veterans alike—it would just look like a random bit of charcoal, an ordinary pebble. But this was indeed the famous Philosopher’s Stone. Its power must have resonated with Rezo’s magic, allowing him to shatter the otherwise magically unbreakable orichalcum.

“Yes... This is it! At long last!”

Rezo shoved me hard in the back, pushing me away.

“Hey!”

I stumbled a few tottering steps, then reached around behind me and pulled out the needle he’d stuck in me.

Guhhh... I felt a chill run up my spine. It hadn’t actually hurt, but it was eerie to realize it had been about a thumb’s length into my neck. Frankly, I was shocked that it hadn’t killed me. I guess Rezo was just that good, huh?

Zelgadis began to chant a spell. Gourry drew his Sword of Light. And Rezo...

Rezo brought the stone to his mouth.

I couldn’t believe my eyes, but that’s exactly what he did. Without a moment’s hesitation, he swallowed the stone whole.

Rrroar!

“Grgh!” A powerful wind suddenly kicked up around us. I instinctively shielded my face with my cape. Then a wave of nausea swept over me and I had to clamp a hand over my mouth. “Urgh, blurgh...”

This was no normal wind; it was a miasma so powerful it had actually manifested physically. And at the center of the swirling force stood Rezo, laughing.

“Take this!”

Zelgadis cast a spell. A pillar of blue flame encased Rezo... and that was it. I don’t know what he’d tried to cast, but whatever it was, it hadn’t worked.

Rezo continued to cackle, his voice taking on a hint of madness: “Oh, I can see! I can see!”

I saw it... For the first time in my life, I saw a person transform into a completely different thing.

Rezo’s eyes were now opened. They revealed a darkness—a darkness tinged red. Indeed, behind his uncurtained eyelids lay gleaming, blood-red eyes, like a pair of rubies.

“Gah... Gahahahahaha! They’re open! My eyes are opened!”

A chunk of flesh sloughed from Rezo’s cheek, exposing something white beneath.

“What?!” someone shouted.

Sluph... Next fell some flesh from his forehead.

That was when it dawned on me. That was when I realized who he really was—what had been sealed inside Rezo’s sightless eyes.

It wasn’t long before Rezo shed his face entirely, revealing a mask of white stone with a pair of rubies where his eyes should have been. The red robes that clad his body had similarly transformed into something hard and stiff.

“It can’t be...” Zelgadis breathed.

He’d realized it too: Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu had returned. Silence befell us all.

“I’ll let you decide your own fates. It’s the least I can do

for your role in contributing to my revival.” The creature that had once been Rezo spoke, standing before us now with utmost calm. “Serve me and I shall grant you long and healthy lives. But if you refuse, then you will leave me no choice. Before I free my other self, the Dark Lord of the North, rooted in place by the Dragon Lord... I will first have to deal with you. Now then, choose wisely. Which path would you prefer?”

It was an unspeakable proposal. To free the Dark Lord of the North would, without question, bring about the destruction of everything we knew. That’s what Rezo Shabranigdu was asking us to do. And if we refused, we’d have to fight him. We’d be up against the Dark Lord who—even if he only had a seventh of his original power—once fought a god for dominion over this world.

The answer was obvious, of course. If he ushered the world to destruction, we were all doomed anyway. So if I was gonna die either way, I’d rather go out clean. I think most beings, not just humans, would feel the same way.

Rezo Shabranigdu surely knew that... yet he’d still asked us to choose.

“What a load of poppycock!” Zolf shouted, his cavalier attitude suggesting a shocking ignorance of the situation. “Get your head out of the clouds! Human culture has progressed a great deal while you were sealed away beyond time! So now, Dark Lord of the old world... I, Zolf, will be done with you!”

Yeah, he definitely had no idea what he was dealing with here...

He raised his hands high, and began to recite:

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

I swear in thy exalted name

Obscured, deep in the flow of time...

I recognized that incantation. It was a Dragon Slave!

Dragon Slave was regarded as the most powerful attack

spell in all of black magic. As its name suggested, it was originally designed to be used against dragons. It was powerful enough to wipe a small castle off the map. It was so powerful, in fact, that a country could throw its weight around on the backs of just a few sorcerers capable of casting it. I'd never dreamed that Zolf had something like that up his sleeve...

I mean, I don't feel bad saying that I'd been wondering for a while how a lousy jerk like Zolf ended up in league with a badass like Zelgadis. I guess that was one mystery solved, at least...

But unfortunately, I already knew Zolf couldn't win with that spell.

"Stop! It won't work!" I shouted to no avail.

"Oho?" Ruby-Eye murmured, sounding impressed—probably about my observation.

"Ah..." Zelgadis gasped quietly. It seemed he'd come to the same realization I had.

But before Zelgadis could call out to warn him, Zolf finished incanting the spell.

"Dragon Slave!"

An explosion erupted from the Dark Lord himself. This was the power of Dragon Slave; no human had ever experienced it and lived to tell the tale.

"I did it!" Zolf declared triumphantly.

But in the same moment...

"Zolf, run!" Rodimus cried.

He must have realized, by instinct alone, that Rezo was still alive.

"What?"

Zolf, however, was still in the dark. He just stood there looking confused.

"Tsk!" The old knight clicked his tongue and charged at Zolf, probably meaning to knock him out of the way. "Just get out of here and—"

It was then that a ball of fire consumed them—both of

them.

“Rodimus! Zolf!” Zelgadis screamed.

As if to answer his call, a figure appeared out of the swirling flames. A figure redder than the fire itself.

“No...”

I felt like I heard something—a voice?—amidst the roar of the blaze.

“Run...” Zelgadis whispered.

“What?” I found myself asking.

“Run!”

On his cue, all three of us took off at top speed.

My eyes were locked on our small campfire. Gourry and Zelgadis were in a similar state.

Ugh, I felt pathetic. Rezo Shabranigdu had completely schooled us. We’d managed to get away, but we knew he’d find us sooner or later—probably sooner, realistically speaking. And when that happened...

“I’ll do it,” Zelgadis whispered as the fire hissed and spat. “I know I can’t win, but... I’d be dishonoring the memory of Rodimus and Zolf if I just ran.”

Picka-pop! The fire crackled again.

“Guess I’ll go with you,” Gourry said softly. “Even if it doesn’t do any good, we can’t just leave that thing running amok.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, it’s nothing. I mean, this is my world too...”

And with that, they both fell silent. I knew why, of course. They were waiting for me.

Not that they came right out and said as much. They weren’t staring me down, waiting for me to chime in, either. They were just quietly watching the fire. But still, I could tell they were waiting for me to say something.

“I...” When I finally did, neither reacted. They just kept silently watching the fire, though I was doing the same thing. “I... don’t want to die.”

"No one's going to force you," Gourry said quietly, his eyes sympathetic and kind.

I found myself rising to my feet.

"No, hear me out. Everyone knows marching into an unwinnable fight is stupid. Screw meat-brained manly ideals of honor and grit! None of that matters when you're dead!"

"Do what you like, then," Zelgadis said. "Go on the run if you want to. Just don't join up with him. If you do, we'll have to kill you too."

I put my hands on my hips and let out a big sigh.

"Excuse me. When exactly did I say I was gonna run?"

"Huh?"

Both boys looked over at me at the same time.

"Don't misunderstand. I said it's stupid to charge into a battle you expect to lose; I never said I wasn't going to fight. Got it? Sure, maybe we only have a one-percent chance of winning! But if we walk into a fight believing we're gonna lose, that one percent turns to zero. So when I say I don't wanna die, that means I'm gonna fight—I'm gonna fight to *win*! And you guys should do the same!"

They looked at each other.

"But... how are we supposed to win?" Zelgadis asked, his tone remarkably meek.

"Well, my specialty black magic can't beat him. But you still have your shamanistic magic, right?"

"Won't work."

"Wh-What? How come?"

"Because. You saw me cast a spell when he first revived, right?"

"Yeah. I didn't recognize the incantation, but it looked like he shrugged it off. Wait... don't tell me..."

"Yeah, that was a Ra Tilt."

"Yikes..." I sighed, my hands flying to my temples nervously.

"What's that?" asked the magic-ignorant Gourry.

Sheesh. Hard to have a discussion with this guy around...

“Ra Tilt is the strongest offensive spell in shamanistic magic. It’s designed to wreck your opponent’s astral form. You can only use it on one target at a time, but in terms of sheer destructive power against a living being, it’s said to be on par with black magic’s Dragon Slave.”

“What’s a Dragon Slave?”

Argh! Get a clue already!

“Dragon Slave is the strongest black magic spell available to humans... Or, at least, so they say. It was invented by the great sage Lei Magnus, who used it to defeat a 1,600-year-old arch dragon. It became known as ‘Dragon Slayer,’ which was eventually shortened to ‘Dragon Slave.’ It’s the spell that Zolf guy tried to use on the Red Priest.”

“So... why didn’t either spell work?”

Give me a break already!

“Tagging out. You take this one, Zelgadis.”

“Shamanistic magic breaks down into elemental magic—spells dealing in earth, water, fire, and wind—and astral magic, which deals with the astral side of reality. As Lina said, Ra Tilt is the latter; it targets an opponent’s astral form. But the Dark Lord is far more of a true astral being than we are. His astral form is incredibly powerful... So much so, I guess, that he can shrug off the meager astral influence any human can muster. In other words, there’s no way we’ll be able to beat him using astral shamanistic magic. As for elemental shamanistic magic, even humans can counterspell that—assuming they’re strong enough, anyway. So in summation, shamanistic magic isn’t going to help us.

“As for why black magic won’t work on him, that’s simple. Black magic is fueled by the world’s darkest emotions—hatred, fear, hostility—and their power is governed by Shabranigdu.”

“You heard it at the start of Zolf’s chant, right? ‘Thou who art darker than twilight, thou who art redder than lifeblood’? That’s addressing Shabranigdu himself,” I added.

“Huh? Did he say that?”

"Of course he did! Were you even listening— Oh, that's right. You don't know chaos words, Gourry."

"Chaos words?"

I was talking about the language that black magic practitioners chanted their spells in, but I didn't feel like explaining every little thing to him.

"Forget that part. The short of it is that using black magic on him is basically like saying, 'Hey, buddy, help us kill you!' Anyone can see how silly that sounds, even you."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Now, before you ask, there are no attack spells in white magic. There are purification spells that'll take out undead like zombies, but those won't work on him either. So, yeah, to sum things up: Me and Zelgadis can't beat this guy."

"Which means..." Zelgadis said, turning his eye on Gourry. "The Sword of Light is our only remaining recourse."

"So you'll be taking point, Gourry. Of course, we'll do what we can to support you."

"Well... you make it sound easy, but..."

"What other choice do we have? I'm open to suggestions if you got any."

"Well... I don't, but..."

"Then that's that."

"I see. So you've made your choice, have you?" a familiar voice interrupted.

I gasped. The three of us whipped around at the same time. When had he arrived? How long had he been there? That haunting red shadow lurking in the night-cloaked forest...

It was the Ruby-Eye Dark Lord, Rezo Shabranigdu.

"Killing Zolf and Rodimus, then picking off cowards as they flee... That hardly makes for a good warmup. So why don't you all accept your unfortunate fate and provide me some proper training? I've been sealed away so long that it's hard to remember how all this works... But don't worry. Soon, I'll be taking on entire armies."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" I asked, slowly rising to my feet.

A warmup? Training?

I was no fan of Zolf, and Rodimus wasn't much to look at... But still, to kill them and call it a warmup?

I know, I know. I'm not one to preach about the sanctity of human life. I've killed people before. Gourry and Zelgadis had too, I'm sure. But I couldn't let that comment slide.

"It's training you want, huh? Fine, we'll play along. But you're gonna end up regretting this."

"Oho. Interesting, little miss. By all means, play along. It will make your deaths so much more satisfying."

"We don't intend to let you kill us," Gourry said as he and Zelgadis both rose behind me.

"Pity the divide between intention and reality. Things often don't go as we plan."

"We can agree on *that*, Rezo Shabranigdu," I spat, turning the Dark Lord's mocking words back on him.

Twitch.

A small shudder ran through the Dark Lord's body. What was that about?

"Now then, let us begin."

The Dark Lord tapped his staff against the ground. Instantly, the ground began to move. No... It wasn't the ground, but something underneath it that was moving—the roots of the forest trees! Granted a semblance of life by the Dark Lord, they wriggled up from the ground like serpents.

"Really? That's the best you can do?" I snorted. "Hey, Zelgadis!"

"On it! Dug Haute!"

Zelgadis immediately picked up what I was putting down. At his command, the ground really did begin to quake. Each violent tremor destroyed more and more of the serpentine tree roots as his Dug Haute tore up the ground they were trying to emerge from.

"Okay, me next! My turn!"

"Go on, little miss," Zelgadis smirked.

"Hmm? And what will you show me?" the Dark Lord mused.

"This one's gonna be on the petty side too, but... Here we go!" I raised my right hand, a ball of light forming within it.

"Not a Fireball, I hope," the Dark Lord warned.

"Urk. Actually, yeah, it is..."

I lightly chuckled the spell at him. The ball of light floated unsteadily toward the Dark Lord, coming to a stop right in front of his face.

"Hmm... A slightly altered version, I see," he observed with perfect calm as the ball of light then danced chaotically around him. "But even if that should hit me, it cannot harm me."

"I know. This is just a demonstration, see?"

"I'm afraid I have no intention of indulging you."

Rezo Shabranigdu made to swing his staff. The second he did...

"Break!" I shouted as I snapped my fingers.

At my command, the ball of light burst and rained down in a spiral.

"Wh-What?!"

Not even the Dark Lord could have seen this coming, hence his cry of surprise as he was engulfed in flame and smoke.

"Gourry! You're up!" I called.

"Got it!" Gourry answered, breaking into a run with the Sword of Light at the ready.

"Get him, Gourry!" Zelgadis encouraged him.

"Die, Dark Lord!" Gourry howled.

The Sword of Light roared through the air... But the Ruby-Eye Dark Lord, Rezo Shabranigdu, just smiled.

"The Sword of Light, hmm? If I'm not mistaken, that's the sword that slew Zanaffar, the demon-beast who razed the Magic City of Sairaag in an instant. Come now. Though I may be weakened, you shouldn't demean me by putting me on

the level of a demon-beast.”

I could scarcely believe what happened next. The Dark Lord actually reached out... and caught the Sword of Light's blade with his bare hand.

“It feels a bit hot, but it's nothing I can't handle.”

He... He was completely unstoppable.

“Ngh! Hrrrngh!” Gourry strained, unable to budge in either direction.

“You seem like a master swordsman, child, but you'd need a far mightier weapon to defeat me. Is this truly all you humans can do? In that case...”

There was a sudden explosion. Gourry went flying backward and landed hard.

“Gourry!”

“I'm... I'm okay,” he said from the ground, twisted in a way that... honestly didn't look even a little bit okay.

“Don't worry. I won't finish him just yet,” the Dark Lord reassured me.

What a jerk! I mean, yeah, it would be even creepier if the Dark Lord was a nice guy, but still...

“Tch...” Zelgadis retreated backward. A moment later, his body was wreathed in flame.

“Zel!”

“Worry not. His body's made of rock; it will take more than that to kill him. Now, as for you, little miss...”

Oooh, rrrgh, grrr!

“You talked a big game, then disappointed in the delivery. You'll need to pay for that.”

Yeah, not good...

The Dark Lord took a step forward.

Just then, something came flying at me from the side. I reflexively snatched it out of the air. It was... a sword hilt? Yes, the Sword of Light!

“Use it, Lina!” Gourry called. “Combine your magic's power with the sword's!”

“Fool,” Rezo Shabranigdu mocked. “You can't mix the

powers of darkness and light.”

He was right about that. Light-aligned magic and dark-aligned magic didn’t mix. They would just cancel each other out. Nevertheless...

“Sword! Give me power!” I shouted, holding the artifact aloft.

Light sprung from the hilt in the fashion of a blade. It was the size of a longsword when Gourry used it, but it now extended to the length of a bastard sword.

I knew it!

“Hah! Futile!” the Dark Lord mocked, though I could sense the faintest hint of panic in his voice.

I began to recite a spell. In form, it was almost exactly like Dragon Slave. But this incantation didn’t address Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, sovereign over our world’s darkness. Instead, I beseeched the greatest of all dark lords, the Lord of Nightmares—the golden one cast down from heaven, whose legend I’d heard in a kingdom I once visited during my travels.

There was no way to harm Shabranigdu using black magic borrowed of his own power. But power borrowed from another dark lord of equal or greater power? That could definitely hurt him.

Thou who art blacker than darkness

Thou who art deeper than the night

Hear me, golden lord of darkness

Adrift upon the Sea of Chaos

“You... You brat!” Shabranigdu screeched, looking shaken. “How... How does an ant like you know of the Great One?!”

I ignored him and continued:

I call to thee, I ask this boon

And to thee I offer this pledge:

So all those in equal measure—

Fools that they are to block our path—

Shall face destruction unconstrained

Grant me power, and unleash thine!

Darkness appeared all around me. Darkness blacker than the dead of night. It was like a void; the complete and total absence of light. It struggled against my control as I worked desperately to rein it in. If I failed to contain the spell here, it would consume all of my life energy. It would kill me.

“Don’t you see how futile this is?!” the Dark Lord exclaimed as he fired multiple balls of pale blue energy without even uttering an incantation. Each one of them was powerful enough to blow away a couple of houses.

But... they all disappeared inside the darkness that enveloped me.

“What?!”

Behold my most secret of secret moves: Giga Slave! The first time I’d tried casting it, the darkness I unleashed dug a new inlet in the shoreline. I hear that, to this day, fish refuse to go anywhere near it. Not even bog moss will grow there.

I was pretty confident that this spell, at least, could do some damage to Shabranigdu. But I also knew that it alone wouldn’t be enough to defeat him. No matter how hard I worked, a mere human was no match for a Dark Lord. The only thing that could tip the balance, as Gourry had said, was the Sword of Light’s power.

But the void swirling around me was already beginning to devour its brilliant blade. The magical light produced by the sword and the magical darkness I’d conjured were fighting each other, not cooperating.

Gourry hadn’t known this would happen when he offered me the sword. I had... But I also knew *more* than that. Shabranigdu did too. The desperation on his face made that much clear.

So I had to try it!

“Heed me, sword!” I screamed. “Consume the darkness and make it a blade!”

“What?!”

The darkness called forth by my Giga Slave spell began concentrating around the sword in my hand. It had worked—

the Sword of Light functioned just the way I thought it did.

Basically, it was an artifact that gave form to a person's will. Light just happened to be the easiest thing for it to manifest. I'd had my suspicions when I saw how differently it materialized for Gourry, who had strong will but not much magic to enhance it; as opposed to me, who had great practice when it came to channeling my will.

But would this be enough to defeat the Dark Lord? It seemed doubtful. If only I had one more thing to clinch this...

"Impudent fool!" he shouted, readying his staff. He then began whispering in a low voice—words I'd never heard before drifted by on the wind. An incantation.

Not good!

The sword hadn't yet absorbed all the darkness conjured by the Giga Slave.

Any spell, big or small, created a magical barrier around the user while it was being cast. So as long as I was in control of the Giga Slave, I could block even those powerful energy balls he threw at me. But to be honest... no part of me wanted to find out if the barrier would hold up against a full-strength blast from a Dark Lord wielding words of power.

Moreover, the Giga Slave's energy was currently being channeled into the sword. I wasn't even sure its barrier was functional in this state.

The tip of the Dark Lord's staff began to shine red. He'd finished before me! If I jumped the gun and fired off my spell before it was complete, there was no way it would vanquish him. I couldn't—

"Stop it!" A voice rang out. It was Zelgadis. "Stop this right now! Didn't you want to see the world, Rezo? Why would you destroy it instead?!"

He sounded completely disoriented. He probably didn't understand exactly what he was saying himself. And yet... the Dark Lord's incantation stopped and the red light capping his staff vanished. Rezo Shabranigdu gazed quietly at Zelgadis where he lay on the ground.

There it was! My clincher!

"Fool..." Shabranigdu said after a long pause, his voice rife with derision.

It was then that the black sword in my hand took form.

"Rezo the Red Priest!" I shouted, holding the dark sword high. "It's your turn to decide your fate! Will you let Shabranigdu devour your soul? Or will you have your revenge on him?!"

"Ohh..." A joyous voice and—"Impossible..."—a panicked voice both came out of his mouth simultaneously.

"Heed me, sword! Destroy the red darkness!"

I swung that sucker down hard! The black light—that was the only way to describe it—cut through the air toward the Dark Lord.

"Pathetic thing! I'll deflect it easily!"

The Dark Lord raised his staff. A ball of black energy shot toward me. And then...

Shhhnk!



A pillar of black fire—or something like it—pierced the heavens.

“Ah...” I let out a soft groan. I didn’t even have the energy to wipe the sweat dripping from my forehead.

Inside the pillar of fire, I could see something writhing. In time, it quieted. I then fell to my knees with another groan.

“Mm... mm... mwahahaha!” The Dark Lord’s laughter echoed through the dark forest. “Very impressive indeed... I never dreamed a mere human could possess such a technique...”

Crack! I heard a strange sound.

“I like you... I like you, little girl. You are truly worthy to be called a prodigy.”

I appreciated the compliment, but I wasn’t in much of a position to revel in it. I’d used up nearly all of my power with that one strike. I didn’t have enough juice left for even a pinkie-sized fireball. It was all I could do to lie there on the ground, heaving for breath.

“But I’m sorry to say... we shan’t ever meet again. Though you may be an uncommonly good sorcerer, at the end of the day, you are only human.”

Crack! That sound again. What in the world...?

“Even with all your magic, you will only last a few hundred years at most. There’s no telling what will befall the world in that time, but I don’t believe another of me will revive while you yet live...”

Huh? What did he mean?

I saw it when I looked up. Dark Lord Shabranigdu’s body was covered in cracks. But then...

“I should like to revive in ages’ time and fight you again... but I know that wish is in vain. Out of respect for you, I shall depart this world quietly.” // “Now I can... sleep...”

Two voices overlapped again: that of Ruby-Eye Dark Lord Shabranigdu, and that of Rezo the Red Priest.

Pop! The cheek of the Dark Lord’s mask broke off and tumbled downward. It crumbled before it ever hit the

ground, carried off like dust on the wind.

"It's been amusing... little miss..." // "Thank you... and I'm sorry..."

Crack.

"It really has..." // "I really am..."

Crack.

"Haha... hahahaha..."

Crack...

All I could do was watch absently as the rest of the Ruby-Eye Dark Lord crumbled to dust. He laughed all the while, his laughter lingering on the wind long after he was gone.

Epilogue

"Is it... over?" Gourry whispered softly some time after Shabranigdu's body had completely disappeared.

"Yes," I said confidently. "Thanks to Rezo."

"Rezo?" Zelgadis asked, looking over to where the Dark Lord had been standing, seemingly skeptical that he was really gone.

"Rezo's soul was still in there somewhere. A tiny shred of goodness that survived even after long years of the Dark Lord gnawing away at his humanity... Between that and his hatred of the Dark Lord's mockery, in the end... he gave himself over willingly to the darkness I created."

"Still, that stunt you pulled was really some—" Gourry said, stopping suddenly when he turned toward me.

Zelgadis had fallen silent too. They'd finally noticed my hair, which had turned silver—a phenomenon that occurs when someone uses too much of their life energy.

"L-Lina, your hair..."

"Aw, I'm fine. I just used a little too much power in one go," I said with a huge grin. "I am pretty tired, though... How're you guys holding up?"

"I'm... okay too," Gourry said, picking himself up shakily.

"Same here. Still alive, at the very least," Zelgadis replied too, getting to his feet a bit more steadily than Gourry.

"Good. I'm glad," I sighed with a smile before flopping back onto the ground and letting sleep carry me away.

A few days later, the three of us arrived at the outskirts of Atlas City.

"Whew! Tonight: good food and a nice, soft bed," I said, looking over the rooftops in the distance. My hair wasn't

back to its glorious chestnut color just yet, but at least I was hale and hardy again.

"That little trip took longer than I expected," Gourry remarked.

"I think it's time I took my leave," Zelgadis chimed in abruptly.

"Huh?" Gourry and I questioned in unison.

"I've done some pretty awful things, and my face is rather well-known... It's not safe for me in a city this size. I don't exactly blend in."

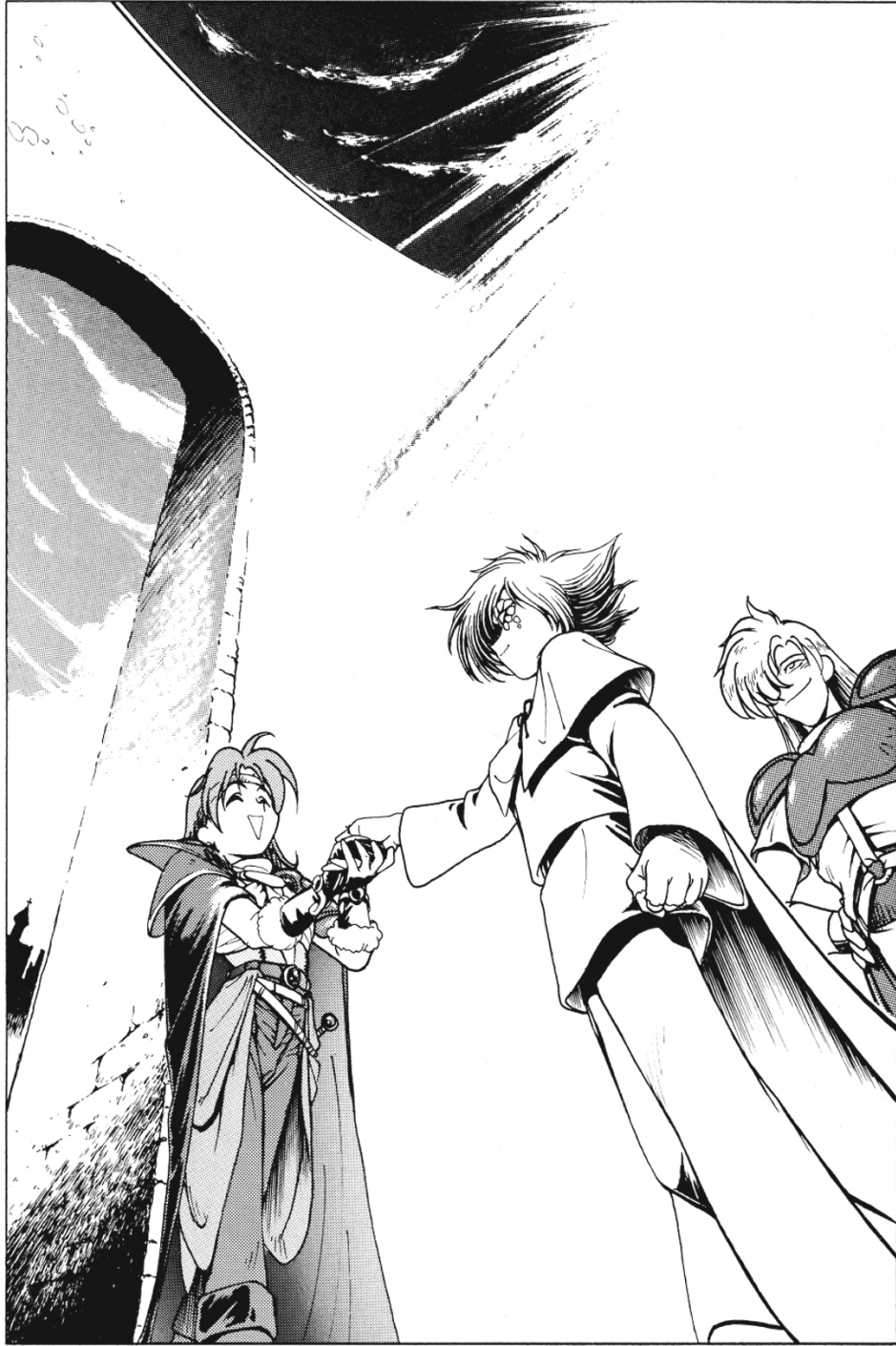
"I see... What'll you do from here, then?" I asked.

"I think I'll see where the wind takes me for a while. I'm sorry about all the trouble I made for you, but..." He scratched at his nose, looking a bit bashful. "If we both survive, maybe we'll run into each other somewhere. Though I suppose you might not be happy to see me again..."

"I hope I get the chance," I said, extending my right hand.

"Here's hoping."

Zelgadis gently took my hand and shook it. Though his skin was made of stone, it felt strangely warm.



"Take care," Gourry said with a small wave.

"Yeah. You too," Zelgadis replied, gently releasing my hand and turning away.

"Y'know, Lina..." Gourry said as we watched Zelgadis head back the way we'd come.

Ever since our battle with the Dark Lord, he'd stopped calling me "little miss" and started calling me by my name.

"Shaking your hand like that... You think he like-likes you or something?"

"Don't be stupid." I laughed it off.

"By the way, what were you planning on doing once you got to Atlas City, Lina?"

"Huh. Hmm..." I thought a minute. "Oh, that's right! Weren't you gonna give me the Sword of Light?"

"When did I ever agree to that?!"

"So... that's a no?"

"Of course it is!"

"Too bad. It would basically make me invincible, and it would open new chapters in magical research..."

"Still no dice!"

"Okay, I've got it now," I said with a nod.

"Got what?" Gourry asked, looking confused.

"I know where I'll be headed next..."

"Where?" he echoed, still baffled.

"Wherever you're going."

"Huh?"

"I'm sticking with you until you agree to give me the Sword of Light!" I shot him a wink before turning to walk off.

"Now let's get going!"

On to Atlas City!

Afterword

Hello there, first-timers! And a fine welcome back to our regular readers! This is the reprinting of the *Slayers* novels! Now, you newcomers might be wondering, “Who is this beautiful blonde writing the afterword?” So allow me to introduce myself! I’m stealing— I mean, filling in for the author, the poor clumsy sap who’s always getting knocked out and locked away and beaten up! You can call me L. Yes, I know there’s another famous character with that name, but I try not to let that bother me!

Incidentally, you’ll be seeing more of me in much later novels. I have a cameo in this one, but it’s so small! How frustrating!

I wasn’t exactly sure how to approach these afterwords, knowing both veterans of the series and newcomers alike would be reading them... So let’s say that if a joke is funny, it was all my doing! And if it bombs, it was the author’s fault! How do you like that?

Some of you who are reading this for the first time might fondly be recalling watching *Slayers* on TV as a child, but these books are how the story was first told about twenty years ago. The author himself is pretty old now too, though I, of course, am eternally 1*! Feel free to put whatever number you want in place of the *.

Hold it! You there thinking, “My preferred age isn’t 1*, but *!” I want you to jot that down in a letter addressed to the editorial department so they can report you to the appropriate authorities! Yes, yes, I know I’m frequently drawn to look childish on the New Year’s cards the author sends in response to fan letters... but that’s just because he’s a terrible artist.

All that aside, of course, we owe the longevity of this series to all of you. The author is also extremely grateful, and he would tell you that himself if he weren't currently locked in some warehouse at the Port of Osaka.

Now, on a different note! As I'm explaining this *Slayers* business to you, I'm also traveling the world, eating and drinking all kinds of wonderful things. I've gone east for noodles at Tenzaru, and west for yakiniku so tender you can cut the meat with chopsticks. If you ask me, I think my gourmet adventures would make for a much more entertaining story than this!

.....

Ah! Now that I think about it, these stories *are* basically gourmet adventures... just with a protagonist who's not me! Grr! You win this round, author!

The author originally wrote the first volume of this series to submit for the Fujimi Fantasia Bunko awards, and it was luckily turned into a series! If you ask me, he used up three-quarters of his life's supply of luck on that. The flip side is that he has utterly rotten luck when it comes to cards and board games! He always takes last place in the Game of Life, only rolling sixes once in a blue moon! I know what you're thinking: every die has a one-in-six odds of rolling a six, right? Except we're talking the author's luck here—not probability.

Anyway, since this was originally written as a one-off and evolved into a series, there are some inconsistencies in the various stories to follow. I've heard rumors that this new printing might fix a few things here and there, but I don't really know and don't especially care. It's not as if the author's going to give me more screentime. Of course, if you ask me, if you're going to do reprints, you might as well improve the story while you're at it!

You could give me so many more appearances! Example: Summary of *Slayers, volume 2: The Sorcerers of Atlas (Reimagined)*!

Lina and Gourry arrive in Atlas City. But nobody cares, so on the writer's tab, I get myself 10,000-yen sukiyaki from Shinsaibashi in Osaka. The big meanie of an author realizes this, and immediately sends assassins to interrupt my lunch! L is in peril! Fight, L!

In the end, while giving evil assassins the slip, I use my sukiyaki pot to turn the tables on them and convince them to treat me to even more food as an apology. Can I enjoy a night out in western Japan to the fullest?! What is the curse of the C*lonel S*nders statue sealed deep away in Dotonbori?! Are there any nice spas around where I can really get some R&R?!

Catch it all next time in *Slayers, volume 2: The Sorcerers of Atlas*. What is it that haunts the entertainment district at night? Is it blood... or the check?!

You feel me? I wanna read that so bad! I'm sure you do now too, so please send lots of letters to the author saying, "Do whatever the afterword lady says or die!"

What's that, you ask? What happens to Lina and Gourry? Who...? Oh, don't worry your pretty little heads about that!

Anyway, look forward to more of me in the afterword of the next volume!

Afterword: Over.

Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

I'd like to formally kick things off by saying that you're one of the most talented translators I've ever had the pleasure of working with. Would you mind telling me how you wound up in the field?

[Liz/TL]

Oh, jeez. Well I was going to do a Lina Inverse-style thing where I jokingly talk up how beautiful and brilliant I am, but now you've gone and caught me off-guard... imagine me waving my hands and saying "ie, ie..." very urgently instead. As for how I got started... I'd say I got pretty lucky in a lot of ways. One was getting to realize as early as high school that this was what I wanted to do. We didn't have a Japanese language program there, but I did well in Spanish, and late on into those classes, when you're getting into actually reading poetry and literature in the language, something sort of clicked for me. It might sound cheesy, but I remember this moment when I realized that there was something sort of magical about the act of translation. That you could convey the meaning of these beautiful words that would be a total mystery to so many people otherwise, and that the more care you put into it, the more deeply it would resonate. It was around that time I was getting into anime, through Sci-Fi Channel late-night programming and *Pokémon* dubs and VHS tapes... it didn't even occur to me that learning Japanese was a thing that was even possible, you know? When you're seventeen years old and no one you know IRL does this, and the internet is AltaVista, webrings and Javascript chatrooms, it seems like, how would I even...

start... doing that? But I got me a book and some printed-out song lyrics, and I just started trying and never stopped. I loved learning Japanese, I love continuing to learn it. And I love making amazing things accessible to others.

[Meg/ED]

So, where did *Slayers* come into the picture for you and what was your first exposure to it?

[Liz/TL]

Well, I mentioned VHS tapes, right? Yeah. Suncoast Video, baby! *Slayers* was the third series I ended up collecting, in part because it was recommended to me, but also in part because the tapes were so cheap. I think it was \$20 for four or five episodes, subbed only. I'll leave readers of the streaming generation to imagine what "not cheap" anime looked like by comparison!

[Meg/ED]

Them's was different times, for sure.

[Liz/TL]

Obviously it was also a really funny and likeable show, but when you're a high school kid spending your babysitting money, the price offers a certain extra incentive.

[Meg/ED]

I believe Lina would appreciate the business, regardless. And in the grand scheme of things, it's kinda crazy to think that this snazzy little production of ours is going to be some folks' first exposure to the series!

[Liz/TL]

It's pretty humbling. Did you know the novels were a thing when you were first watching the series back in the day?

[Meg/ED]

No, not a clue! My introduction to the anime was before the books were ever available in English, so I didn't even know they existed until years later. I happened to stumble across a couple of them at a convention and thought, "Oh, nice! *Slayers* got a novel adaptation!" (Ha!)

[Liz/TL]

Oh my gosh.

[Meg/ED]

Oh, how young and foolish I was... And surprised at both the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between the two versions!

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I was vaguely aware of the novels when I was watching the series. For me they were kind of this nebulous thing that existed only in rumor. You know, the novels, where Lina's sister is a real character and they reveal the other alt worlds besides the one from *Lost Universe*! But I never actually read them myself until we started doing this, and even from the start, the differences were shocking. First, the elephant in the room: Lina doesn't do a Dragon Slave!

[Meg/ED]

Nope! I dare say she has better tricks up her sleeve.

[Liz/TL]

I think the differences are exemplified by the first scene we get. In the anime, they start by showing you her raid on the bandit camp. We see her chucking Fireballs and raising havoc willy-nilly... and THEN you get to the scene on the road, the first scene in the book, where she's just snarking her way through and using her wits. Both versions suit their medium, but give you a very different view of her as a main

character.

[Meg/ED]

And it only continues from there! I think, in general, the anime is really pinned on the hijinks and the fun of the series whereas the novels are quite unafraid to stray on the darker side of things. That's not to say the novels aren't simultaneously fun, however, because I got *several* laughs out of this first volume.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, like the trolls scene in the inn. In the anime, her spell just kind of makes them poof out of existence! But in the book it's this totally grody thing. That's humor too, but it's a darker kind of humor—the joke is her going, “erk, maybe that was a bit much.”

[Meg/ED]

Exactly! And that's such a great aspect of the series. Even when things get grim, the humor never really stops. I personally live for Lina and Gourry's banter, particularly in moments of peril.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, it's so good it's kind of intimidating. Translating anything that has that kind of peppy flow is a push and pull between “preserve that flow in English” and “make sure it's what they're really saying.” It's there where having an experienced and talented editor comes in handy.

[Meg/ED]

I confess that I have two siblings who remind me of Lina and Gourry constantly, so I just try to imagine them arguing when I work on those scenes.

[Liz/TL]

That's amazing. Yeah, I think people will read a book like this and be like, "Oh, who's the translator?" But the editor plays such a huge and important role in any translation, and in this book especially, I feel like it's really fifty-fifty. There's a lot of your voice in the finished product.

[Meg/ED]

If I'm allowed to say so myself, I think we make a great team! Your work is of such superior quality that you really inspire my own work on the series; I want it to have the treatment it's always deserved, down to the tiniest of details. Really, *Slayers* is just such a fun, wild ride that I want to share it with as many people as possible.

[Liz/TL]

Agreed. When I look back, I think... wow, this was the start of my journey, more than twenty years ago. And now I'm here, I get to be a part of it. It's hard to express what an honor that is.

[Meg/ED]

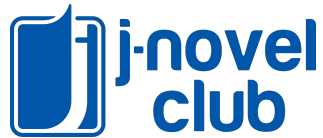
Likewise. But no getting mushy yet! I feel like we've only just gotten started, and Atlas City is already on the horizon...

[Liz/TL]

Next time: Megan's backstory, *Slayers NEXT* and mazoku???

[Meg/ED]

Oh my!



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Slayers: Volume 1
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Illustrations by Rui Araizumi

SLAYERS Vol. 1
First published in Japan in 2008 by KADOKAWA
CORPORATION, Tokyo
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA
CORPORATION, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2020